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THE GREAT FRENCH WRITERS



MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

The Great French Writers

Marie de Rabutin - Chantal

MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

Marie Louis Antoine

BY

GASTON BOISSIER

OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY

TRANSLATED BY

MELVILLE B. ANDERSON

TRANSLATOR OF HUGO'S "SHAKESPEARE"



CHICAGO

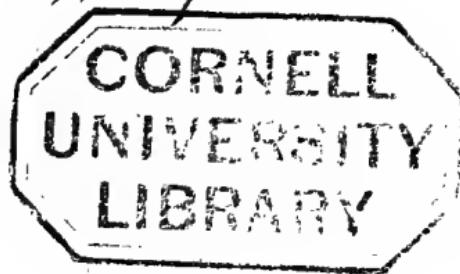
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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES, BY THE FRENCH EDITOR	9
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION, BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS .	15

Part I.

THE WOMAN.

- I. Portrait of Madame de Sévigné 18.
- II. Girlhood, 22.—Marriage, 24.—Widowhood, 26.
- III. Her tutor Ménage, 32.—Her suitors, Bussy and Fouquet, 36.—An ideal friend, warm-hearted, kind, loyal, 37.
- IV. Her son Charles, 43.—Her daughter, Madame de Grignan, 45.
- V. Her cousin, Count de Bussy-Rabutin, 54.
- VI. Madame de Lafayette and the Duke de La Rochefoucauld, 66.—Her relatives, Monsieur and Madame de Coulanges, 71.

Part II.

THE WRITER.

- I. Letter-writing fashionable in the seventeenth century, 81.—Voiture, 82.—Contemporary admiration of Madame de Sévigné's letters, 84.—Did she write with an oblique glance at the public? 85.
- II. A literary expert from the start, 89.—Her teachers, Chapelain and Ménage, 91.—Good effects of this grammatical and literary training, 97.—Her reading, 100.—How she educated her grandchildren, 102.
- III. The *précieuses*, 105.—A period of transition in literature and diction, 107.—The education obtained in social intercourse, 109.
- IV. The birth of her talent, 114.—Her literary naturalness and simplicity, 119.—Ingenuity and wit, 120.—Imagination her peculiar gift, 123.—Susceptibility to the influence of more positive natures, 127.—Freedom and originality of expression, 131.—Why did she not write a connected work? 133.

Part III.

THE WORK.

VALUE OF MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ'S LETTERS AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS 135

- I. The light they throw upon the domestic life of the time, 136.—Outward formality among relatives, 137—Madame de Sévigné's maternal love exceptional, 141.—Fashionable neglect of offspring, especially of girls, 142.

- II. Topics of the letters: health, 150.—A fashionable watering-place, 153.—Diseases, doctors, and drugs, 156.
- III. Aristocratic mendicancy and royal bounty, 159.—Madame de Sévigné's wealth, 162.—The dear, good Abbé de Coulanges, her faithful steward, 163.—Her thrift and practical shrewdness, 166.—Prodigal living at Grignan Castle, 169.
- IV. Madame de Sévigné practises economy on her estate, 176.—Description of Les Rochers and of life there, 183.—Her descriptions of Nature, 189.
- V. Madame de Sévigné's letters supplement and correct the formal histories, 192.—Differences between her time and ours, 195.—Reverence for the king, 196.—Religious faith and scepticism of that time, 198.—Madame de Sévigné's unorthodox piety, 201.—Her enviable death, 204.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES.

BY THE FRENCH EDITOR.

OUR closing century has had from the outset, and will bequeath to its successor, a deep-seated inclination for historical studies. It has pursued them with a zest, a method, and a success, that the preceding ages had not known. The history of the globe and of its inhabitants has been entirely rewritten ; the pick of the archeologist has brought to light the bones of the heroes of Mycenæ and the very features of Sesostris. By the interpretation of ruins and the decipherment of hieroglyphics men have been enabled to reconstruct the existence of the illustrious dead, and even in some cases to enter into their thoughts.

With a passion still more intense because seasoned with love, our century has devoted itself to the task of reviving the great authors of all literatures, the men who hold in trust the genius of nations and are the spokesmen of races. In France there has been no lack of scholars to occupy themselves with this task ; they have edited the works and unravelled the biographies of those illustrious men whom we cherish as ancestors, and who have contributed, even more

than princes and great captains, to the formation of modern France, not to say of the modern world.

For it is one of our glories that the work of France has been accomplished less by dint of arms than by force of thought. The influence of our country upon the world has always been independent of its military triumphs ; this influence has been recognized as preponderant in the most mournful hours of the nation's history. For this reason the great thinkers of our literature interest not merely their direct descendants, but also a numerous European posterity scattered beyond the frontiers.

Originators at first, then popularizers, the French were the earliest, in the midst of the turbulence that marked the beginning of the Middle Ages, to recommence a literature ; the first cradle-songs of modern society were French songs. Like Gothic art and like the foundation of universities, the literature of the Middle Ages begins in our country, thence spreading throughout Europe : such is the initiation.

But this literature failed to recognize the importance of form, of restraint, of measure ; it was too spontaneous, not sufficiently reflective, too indifferent to questions of art. In the time of Louis XIV. France brought literary form into esteem ; this was the epoch of the popularization of literary principles, in anticipation of the age of philosophical renewal, whose European harbingers in the eighteenth century were to be Voltaire and Rousseau, and in anticipation of the eclectic and scientific period in which we live. Had this task not been accomplished as it

was, the whole course of modern literature would have been different. Ariosto, Tasso, Camoens, Shakspeare, Spenser, all the foreign writers combined, both those of the Renaissance and those who followed, would not have sufficed to bring about this reform ; and our age would perhaps have missed those impassioned poets who were likewise perfect artists, freer than their precursors and purer in form than Boileau himself had dreamed, — such poets as Chénier, Keats, Goethe, Lamartine, Leopardi.

In our own time, accordingly, many works whose publication is abundantly justified by all these reasons have been devoted to the great writers of France. But have these powerful and charming spirits their due place in the present literature of the world ? In no wise, — not even in France ; and for manifold reasons.

In the first place, having made in the last century the belated discovery of the literatures of the North, ashamed of our ignorance, we directed to foreign objects an enthusiasm which, though not unprofitable, was perhaps excessive, and which was at all events very prejudicial to the study of our national ancestors. Furthermore, it has not been possible, hitherto, to associate these ancestors with our life as we should have liked to do, and to mingle them with the current of our daily thoughts ; at least, it has not been easy to do this, and precisely because of the nature of the labor that has been devoted to them. For where, in fact, are these dead men made to live again ? Either in their works, or in treatises on liter-

ary history. This is indeed much ; the noble, scholarly editions and the artistically grouped treatises have, in our time, made such a communion of souls less difficult than formerly. But this is not enough : we are now accustomed to have everything made easy ; grammars and sciences have been clarified, just as travelling has been facilitated ; the impossible of yesterday has become the habitual of to-day. This is why the old treatises of literature often repel us, and why complete editions do not attract ; they are better suited to those hours of study which are so rarely rescued from the exigencies of business or profession, than to the hours of relaxation which are more frequent. Thus it happens that the book which at these moments opens of itself is usually the latest novel ; while the works of the great men, complete and intact, motionless as family portraits, venerated but rarely contemplated, remain in orderly array on the upper shelves of our libraries.

We love them and we neglect them. These great men seem too remote, too different, too learned, too inaccessible. The mind is oppressed by the thought of the edition in many volumes, of the notes that distract the attention, of all that formidable scientific apparatus, — perhaps also by the vague recollection of the college, of the study of the classics, of the juvenile task : already the vacant hour has taken flight ; and thus we fall into the way of letting our elder authors stand apart, majestic and silent, as personages whose intimacy we do not seek.

The aim of the present collection is to bring back

to the fireside those great men who have been relegated to rarely-visited temples, and to re-establish between ancestors and descendants that union of thought and word which can alone assure, in despite of the changes that time brings, the preservation of our national genius in its purity. The volumes in course of publication will contain precise information touching the life, the work, and the influence of each of the writers who have conquered a place in universal literature, or who represent an original side of the French mind. The books will be small, and of moderate price ; thus they will be within the reach of all. As to size, paper, and print, they will be like the specimen in the reader's hands. Upon doubtful points they will embody the results of the latest investigation, and may thus be of service even to those who know. They will contain no notes,¹ the name of the author being a sufficient guaranty for each work, as the co-operation of the most distinguished contemporaries is assured.

In brief, to recall the part played by our great writers,—which, thanks to the researches of erudition, is to-day better known than ever,—to strengthen their influence over the present age, to tighten the cords and reawaken the affection that bind us to our literary past ; by the contemplation of this past to inspire faith in the future, and to silence, if possible, the bodeful voices of the faint-hearted,—such is our principal aim. We believe also that this collection will have several other advantages. It is well for

¹ Save those of the translator.

every generation to take an inventory of the wealth it has found in its ancestral heritage ; it thus learns to make a better use of this wealth. Moreover, a generation is itself epitomized, unveiled, and revealed in its own judgments. If the reception accorded to this series shall permit it to be brought to a successful issue, it will therefore be useful for the knowledge of the present as well as for the reconstruction of the past.

J. J. JUSSERAND.

April 10, 1887.

MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ.

INTRODUCTION.

IT may seem difficult at this date to speak of Madame de Sévigné; so much has been written about her that apparently little more remains to be said. As hers was a nature notably sincere and open, the writers who have dealt with her have generally made an accurate portrait, and have experienced no great difficulty in depicting her as she was. It follows that one who wished at all hazards to be original, would risk depicting her as she was not; he would perhaps neglect the most obvious qualities, on the pretext that the world is familiar with them; he would attribute undue importance to others; and in order to exhibit her in a new aspect, he would draw a fancy picture.

Not wishing to expose myself to this danger, I shall make no attempt at novelty. It shall be my anxiety neither to find unknown estimates nor to hunt up citations that have never yet

been made. After having read again Madame de Sévigné's letters, I shall simply give the impression they leave upon my mind, without considering whether I am not repeating what others have said before. Such is the only method I shall follow in this work.

I do not think it would be interesting to relate here anew, in a connected manner, the life of Madame de Sévigné. Others have done this with an abundance of details that leaves nothing to be desired. Those who would like to know her biography thoroughly have only to read Walckenaer's somewhat diffuse but agreeable "Memoirs," or, what will please them more, the tasteful notice that M. Mesnard prefixed to the edition of her works in "The Great Writers of France."¹ Her life, moreover, contains nothing romantic; it is made up of the ordinary incidents of a woman's life, and may be summed up in a few words. Born in 1626, in the middle of the reign of Louis XIII., of a great Burgundian family, an orphan at the age of seven, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal married, in 1644, a Breton gentleman, the Marquis de Sévigné. This marriage was not fortunate; Sévigné was killed in a duel in 1651. He left two children,—a son who was an intelligent man and a brave soldier, but who, tired of

¹ Not to be confounded with the present series. — TR.

waiting for promotion and seized with homesickness, retired from service early and married in Brittany; a daughter who in 1669 married the Count de Grignan, Lieutenant-Governor of Provence. She followed her husband to the seat of his government, and from that time Madame de Sévigné's whole life consisted in awaiting her daughter or in going to visit her, in thinking of her, and in writing to her. Thus was produced the correspondence that forms the glory of Madame de Sévigné. She died in 1696, during one of those reunions at Grignan Castle to which she so eagerly looked forward.

These few dates will suffice to guide us in the study we are about to undertake.

I shall cite Madame de Sévigné's letters from the edition of "The Great Writers of France," correcting and completing this from M. Capmas's publication of her "Inedited Letters."

PART I.

THE WOMAN.

THE most interesting thing in Madame de Sévigné's correspondence is herself. We must therefore endeavor at the outset to know her by means of what she says, or of what others say to her. We possess nearly fifteen hundred letters that she wrote or received,—more than enough to reveal the entire woman. It is highly probable that a woman who wrote so much, even had she been mysterious and dissembling, as Madame de Sévigné was not, must have let out all her secrets.

I.

To begin with, was she pretty? It is no idle curiosity that makes us ask this question. Although we desire especially to know the qualities of her mind and of her heart, it would not be amiss to be able to connect them with a living face; the whole would be better understood, and we should have the entire person.

Unfortunately, the portraits of her that are preserved do not agree, and some of them awaken doubts. The pastel by Nanteuil alone appears to be uncontestedly authentic, and it is subject to the drawback that it represents the marchioness when she was no longer young. It is a good face, broad, animated, smiling, reflecting good-nature and intelligence; but it is not a really pretty face. Looking at it, one cannot help being surprised that she should have had so many admirers. We shall see that during her married life and after she became a widow there was a crowd of would-be supplanters or successors of her husband, and that among these numerous wooers were to be found the handsomest gentlemen of the court and the greatest names of France. Obviously they would have been much less eager to please her had she been homely. Once in her later life, being told that Pauline, her granddaughter, resembled her, she wrote to Madame de Grignan: "Was I ever as pretty as she? They say that I was not a little so." It must be admitted that in her portraits she is but moderately so, and that, taking her as the painters represent her, we hardly perceive that her face justifies so many sighs on the part of Conti, Turenne, Rohan, Bussy, Du Lude. We should, therefore, be tempted to accuse the

painters of not having accurately rendered the charm of her features; but as these painters were men of talent, distinguished in their art, it is more probable that this charm partly eluded delineation, and that the qualities which pleased in her person were of the kind that the pencil can scarcely reproduce. Madame de Lafayette, in the verbal portrait which, in the person of an unknown woman, she makes of her friend, says to her: "The brilliancy of your wit gives such lustre to your complexion and to your eyes that, although wit would seem to affect only the ears, it is nevertheless certain that yours dazzles the eyes." It seems to me that this phrase explains the failure of the painters to represent Madame de Sévigné as she appeared to her friends. How limn this reflection of the mind upon the face, this illumination of the features by the qualities within? Yet this was what constituted the chief attraction of Madame de Sévigné, and gave character to her beauty. If, therefore, we would have her true portrait, we must add much to the one the painters have left us. Take, if you will, the pastel of Nanteuil, and begin by depriving her of several years. When we have brought her back "to the bloom of her twentieth year," of which Madame de Lafayette speaks, give her what no one, not even her cousin

Bussy denies her,—blond tresses, thick and flowing, eyes full of fire, an admirable complexion of a lustre and a freshness “ beheld only in a sunrise or in the finest roses of spring; ” adorn her especially with those charming hues of intelligence and goodness that illuminate her features, let her soul be read upon her face,—and we shall understand why, although not wholly beautiful, she should have attracted more attention than many women of irreproachable beauty. We are told that her first look was almost irresistibly wining. “ I seem to see her yet,” writes Abbé Arnauld in his “ Memoirs,” “ as she appeared to me the first time it was my good fortune to see her, sitting in her open carriage between her son and her daughter,—all three realizing the poet’s picture of Latona between young Apollo and little Diana, so radiant with grace and beauty were the mother and her children.” A little later, when the first surprise was past, people perceived the imperfections of the face with which they had at first been fascinated. It was noticed “ that the eyes were too small and different in color, the eyelids mottled, and the nose a little flattened at the end.” But these defects did not long offend. As one was by this time closer to her, one could hear her talk, and this was another charm not to

be resisted. "Those who listen to you," said Madame de Lafayette, "no longer perceive that anything is wanting to the regularity of your features; they concede you the most consummate beauty in the world."

II.

THUS we have made a first acquaintance with Madame de Sévigné, but the impression is still very hasty and confused. We have barely caught a distant and very indistinct glimpse of her. If we desire to know anything more of her than the features of her face, we must endeavor to follow her into the grand society which she entered early and in which she passed her life.

Of her youth we know little. Her cousin, Bussy-Rabutin, to whom they wished to marry her, pretends that he was frightened by "a certain madcap fashion" in which he saw her act, and that he thought her "the prettiest girl in the world to be the wife of another." Although Bussy is a great slanderer, I am somewhat inclined to believe him when he tells us of the madcap ways of Mademoiselle de Chantal. She had lacked the watchful care of a mother; the good Abbé de Coulanges, her uncle, who took such care of her fortune,

could not teach her certain delicacies that a woman alone can value aright. She was early thrown into very gay circles where there was little constraint; she was familiar with men and women engaged in intimacies that were a mystery to no one, and it is probable that none of these transparent intrigues escaped the keenness of her observation. Young as she was, she must have understood what was but half concealed; she penetrated the meaning of the hints she heard. Is this for her sake to be regretted? I cannot tell. It is a delicate problem in the education of girls, to know whether it is best to tell them all or to conceal all. Every father is forced to reflect upon this, and we see equally wise fathers reaching contrary conclusions. Each method, in fact, may produce different effects, according to the disposition to which it is applied. There are doubtless those to whom this revelation of evil is very injurious when it comes too soon: it prematurely corrupts the imagination and may foster precocious excitation. Others, on the contrary, are steeled by such knowledge; the spectacle to which they are accustomed before the age when it can be fatal, preserves them afterward from grievous surprises. The violence of certain sentiments is weakened by depriving them of the charm of mystery. What

is certain is, that for Mademoiselle de Chantal this premature acquaintance with life did not involve the dangers that might have been feared. Bussy was afterwards compelled to acknowledge this.

At the age of eighteen she married, as we have seen, the Marquis de Sévigné. As she was free in her actions and mistress of her fortune under the easy guardianship of the Abbé de Coulanges, it is probable that no constraint was exercised, and that Sévigné pleased her. He was a handsome, dashing cavalier; he had birth and courage, and critical people like Bussy thought him clever. Marie de Chantal, so kind-hearted, so affectionate, so prone to attach herself to those about her, had to make no effort in order to love him. We can therefore presume that the beginning of the wedlock was happy. They spent this time in their Château des Rochers; and this first absence was so long that Bussy and his friend Lenet, a clever man who was much involved in the intrigues of the Fronde, felt obliged to address to the amorous couple, who would not leave their nest, an agreeably versified entreaty designed to draw them back into society:—

“ Hail to you, rural gentry,
Adscripts to the glebe of Brittany,
Fixtures in your country mansion,
Beyond all rime or reason,” etc.

It cannot be doubted that this was a time of happiness for the young wife; but this happiness did not last long. Sévigné turned out to be the most fickle of husbands. "He loved everywhere," Bussy tells us, "but he never loved any one so amiable as his wife." This happy phrase may be applied to many besides the Marquis de Sévigné. At the very time when he was distressing her by his faithlessness, he was ruining her by his extravagance. It must be admitted that of the great ladies of that time whom Cousin so lavishly praises, many sold themselves almost as frequently as they gave themselves; and Sévigné found it very easy to purchase them with his wife's fortune. This gave rise, doubtless, to many painful scenes between husband and wife. Like all men who fear and deserve reproaches, the husband took the initiative; he was rough, grumbling, surly, and somewhat prided himself upon resembling the grand prior Hugo de Rabutin, whom he called "my uncle the Pirate." Madame de Sévigné, from whom he did not take the trouble to hide his caprices, could no longer respect him; but we are told that she still loved him, and that when he fought a duel for one of his mistresses and was killed by his rival, she could not refrain from weeping. These tears were sincere, whatever

Bussy may pretend; but it may easily be believed that, once the first emotion past, she soon reconciled herself to a widowhood that restored her peace and freedom. She so thoroughly forgot this libertine and spendthrift husband that in all her correspondence with her children she never mentioned his name.

She was twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age when, her first mourning being over, she re-entered society. Now we begin to get better acquainted with her. We have a large number of letters belonging to this period, and the evidence of contemporaries concerning her becomes more definite. This return of the young widow to the fashionable *salons* was a triumphant one. She came back more lovely than people had ever seen her. Her beauty, as we have just now described it, harmonized better with a certain maturity than with early youth. Her self-possession in conversation, which might have seemed out of place in a young girl, was a great charm in a woman. She was now free to give rein to her natural vivacity; she was no longer bound to check the witticism upon her lips, and she could yield without restraint to the zest of conversation where the interlocutors stimulate one another, and the wit of each is enhanced by the wit of all. "When they get me to talking,"

said she, "I hold my own well enough." She must indeed have been peerless. Accordingly, she was soon surrounded by a court of admirers. The memoirs of the time and Bussy's correspondence make known to us some of those who were attentive to her. They were, as I have said, the greatest personages of the court,—Conti, a prince of the blood; Turenne, a victorious general; Fouquet, a Chancellor of the Exchequer; the Duke de Rohan; the Marquis de Tonquedec; Count du Lude, who came nearest to succeeding; but we must believe they all failed, since Tallemant, who was slander personified, and Bussy-Rabutin, who had a grudge to pay, found nothing to say against her. Bussy, however, who did not wish to make a panegyric, strove to belittle in some measure a merit which he is compelled to recognize. "She is of a cold disposition," he tells us; "at least if we are to believe her late husband, who was indebted to this circumstance for her fidelity."

This is certainly one of the phrases that must have given the greatest pain to Madame de Sévigné, in that malicious portrait which her cousin made of her. A woman does not like to have it said that she is virtuous only by temperament; there are perhaps some who would prefer to be deemed a trifle guilty.

This explanation of Bussy has accordingly much disturbed Madame de Sévigné's friends. I confess, however, that I believe it would be hard to find a different one. Let us bear in mind that she was not one of those widows described by Bossuet, who, "really widowed and desolate, bury themselves in the tombs of their husbands." She lived in the midst of a very gay world, and took pleasure in it. She associated with women whom even people far from prudish accused of being "rather free and easy." She liked to have a train of followers, and gladly received the attentions of all. She did not dislike very free talk; it is asserted that she had the talent of entering into the spirit of everything that was said, and that she led her interlocutors farther than they had meant to go; "sometimes, also," it is added, "they led her a mad chase." How happens it that all this turned out as well as it did; how explain the fact that a handsome woman, who liked so well to play with danger, did not at last succumb to it? She herself has given a reason that appears, at first, probable enough. It was the love of her children that preserved her from all peril; she would have needed more than one heart to love several objects at the same time. "I perceive every day," she writes to her daughter, "that the big fishes

devour the small fry." But this explanation does not explain all. In reality, Madame de Sévigné's love for her daughter was sufficient to her only because she did not feel the need of another affection. These are sentiments of different nature, and are not always mutually exclusive: by the side of maternal love there is a large place open for another kind of love. Must we then, as it has been said, attribute her virtue to her piety? But she was not at that time especially devout; besides, religion might prevent her from having a lover, but not from taking another husband. Examples were frequent around her; there is no epoch when widowhood was borne with so little grace. M. de Grignan had already been twice married, and Mademoiselle de Sévigné was merely his third wife. "He changes wives as he changes horses," said Bussy. The Prince de Guéméné had recently lost a deeply-loved wife, and he was said to be plunged in the blackest grief, when, at the expiration of three months, people were informed one morning that he had been married the previous evening at midnight, with the privity of no one save the king. "Having eaten salt all his life," wrote Madame de Sévigné to her daughter, "he cannot do without it; three months of widowerhood have seemed to him three centuries; speculation

does not divert the mind ; all this is done in support of the home, and his affection is based upon this immovable *solid*." The Duke de Saint-Aignan waited a little longer. After weeping the loss of his wife for six months, and affecting to retire into a desert, he quietly married "a little waiting-maid" of the duchess,—he being then seventy-three years of age. The following year a son was born, who became, like himself, a member of the Academy, and who lived until 1776 ; thus the father was born in the reign of Henry IV., while the son died in the reign of Louis XVI. What the men did the women did ; and no one would have blamed Madame de Sévigné had she promptly found a successor for that husband whom, it was thought, she had too long mourned. It is said, indeed, that her experience of marriage had not been such as to make her eager to try it again ; but there is no lack of women who have been no more fortunate than she, and who have not permitted that circumstance to dismay them. On the contrary, they deem themselves entitled to some amends, their want of success the first time being but an added reason for trying their fortune once more. If Madame de Sévigné did not do the same, it is because her taste was different, and she did not feel drawn that way by nature. In this respect

her daughter resembled her, and her son also, notwithstanding his frolics. He had his mistresses, but only for the sake of being like others of his age and station; and La Rochefoucauld, a good judge in such matters, thought him not "of the material of which passions are made." Both in the son and in the daughter this coldness of temperament was an inheritance from their mother.

III.

FOR all that, we must not believe Bussy when he tells us of his cousin that "all her warmth was in her mind." She loved much, and with genuine affection; she merely accorded to friendship what she denied to love. She spent her youth in making friends who remained such throughout her life. Is there a more enviable lot? If she lent a willing ear to the declarations that men made her, it was principally because the sport amused her; she was very glad to inspire in others sentiments that she could not share. But I think also that she must have feared to repel, by too great severity, the men of sense and courage who surrounded her. On no account would she lose a friend; so she did not scruple to encourage their addresses. Being no prude, and as words

did not frighten her, she let them talk. Her skill was unequalled to check them by a smile when they threatened to go too far, and to encourage them by a kind word when they began to despair. Are these really the tricks of a coquette? So it has been asserted, and perhaps justly; but may there not be in friendship an allowable coquetry, just as there is in love? Madame de Sévigné did not deceive those who paid their court to her; she made them understand clearly how far she could meet them, and what they might hope from her. Within these limits she was capable of making great efforts to retain them, and to keep alive within them that degree of warmth and of vivacity which belongs to genuine attachments.

Of all these adroit and charming ways some trace remains in her correspondence. It was perhaps with her tutor, Ménage, that she first had to exercise her tact. She owed much to him, and was anxious not to wound him. Besides, she was not loath to be celebrated by one of the finest minds of her time. "Always speak kindly of me," she wrote to him; "it does me signal honor." This learned man had the foible of wishing to appear too much like a man of fashion; he liked to distinguish between himself and college dons, whom he treated with profound disdain. In order to put down his

enemy, Father Bouhours, he thinks it sufficient to call the latter "a little schoolmaster of the third form, who sets up to be a refined critic." Ménage was anxious above all things not to be taken for a pedant. In his youth he had attempted to learn the corant and the gavot in order to give himself a fashionable air; but he confesses that after three months of unavailing efforts he was obliged to give it up. Even his most erudite books are pervaded by this coxcombry. Addressing a dedicatory epistle to the Chevalier de Méré, a fashionable wit, he says: "I pray you to recollect that when we were rivals for the favor of a lady of high rank and worth, whatever the passion I may have felt for this noble person, I gladly permitted her to love you more than me, because I loved you more than I loved myself." Such foppery appears singular enough at the head of the "Observations on the French Language." He was a great ladies' man, and liked to pay them tender compliments in the manner of the time; the mischief was that poor Ménage, while courting them for the mere gentility of the thing, became himself more deeply infatuated than he could have wished. What was intended to be a mere game, like the gallantry of Voiture to Mademoiselle Paulet, turned out rather more seriously in the case of Ménage.

He was at first greatly enamoured of Mademoiselle de la Vergne, who afterwards became Madame de Lafayette, and at the very time to which Cardinal de Retz referred when he said of her, “She pleased me much, and the truth is that I pleased her little.” Ménage, in order to be more fortunate, overwhelmed her with compliments in all languages ; he celebrated her in Latin verses, in which he called her—

“ *Sequanidum sublime decus, formosa Laverna,*”¹

then in French and in Italian. He next turned to Madame de Sévigné, whose assiduous worshipper he was for several years. From such of her letters to him as have been preserved, it is easy to see that the course of his love was by no means smooth. Ménage was never satisfied. If everything was refused, he complained bitterly ; he complained still more when too much seemed to be granted, for then he thought himself treated as a person of no consequence. His good opinion of himself did not prevent him from perceiving at times the absurd rôle that a lover of his age and station played in society ; besides, his many enemies did not let him forget it. Then he became

¹ “ *Lovely Laverna, stateliest lily on the bank of Seine.*”

“ *Laverna* ” was Ménage’s love-Latin for her maiden name, La Vergne.—TR.

defiant, rude, capricious, ill-humored ; he sulked and made scenes. We have verses by him in which he breaks out violently against Madame de Sévigné : —

“ At length my wrath bursts forth : ‘t is done ;
I will forget the ungrateful one
Who ridicules my pain and tears ;

• • • • •
Thou haughty, cold, and cruel dame ;
Yes, all my love forget, conceal,
Thou tigress with the heart of steel !
And in the blackest deep of night
Bury thy memory out of sight.”

Madame de Sévigné was constantly soothing him. Sometimes she gently rallied him to make him smile ; on occasion she could feign jealousy : “ You make this mock quarrel with me only that you may give yourself entirely to Mademoiselle de la Vergne.” If he affected to remain obstinately at home, she unhesitatingly wrote to him : “ I beg you once more to come to me ; and since you are not willing that it should be to-day, I pray you let it be to-morrow. Should you not come, perhaps you will not shut your door against me, and you will be forced to admit yourself a little in the wrong.” On another occasion, when he was about to depart from Paris, probably in dungeon toward her, she closed her letter with

the words: "Adieu, my friend, of all friends the best." Who could resist such kind words? His wrath melted, and the sulker was reconquered.

It was no great feat to make Ménage listen to reason. But Madame de Sévigné had to contend with much more dangerous aspirants. Her cousin Bussy, who had despised her, or rather feared her, when she was Mademoiselle de Chantal, changed his mind after she was married. He slyly endeavored to profit by the infidelities of her husband, which he took care to make known to her in order to arouse her to revenge. His failure did not daunt him; he relates that, after her widowhood, he was the first to speak to her of love. But he admits, with a frankness creditable to him, that he was no more fortunate than before. Although the character of friend did not seem quite sufficient to him, he was forced to be content with it; he had, as he says, to will what she willed, and to love her in her own way.

Fouquet, the Minister of Finance, was a still more formidable suitor: "Did ever minister find woman cruel?" He attacked Madame de Sévigné with the intrepidity of one accustomed to success; but he also was obliged "to submit to reason." It is known that he wronged

the marchioness, placing her letters in the famous strong-box where he kept the secret records of his amours. When his papers were investigated by order of the king, these letters were found; but the king and his minister, Le Tellier, who read them, declared them "the most modest letters in the world." Fouquet, therefore,— the all-powerful Fouquet,— had submitted like the rest. "When you do not will what others will," wrote Bussy to his cousin, "others must conform their wills to yours; one is still too happy to be numbered among your friends. There is hardly another woman in the kingdom who can reduce her lovers to content themselves with mere friendship."

Few people have had as many friends as Madame de Sévigné. In all the crises of her life, her correspondence shows her to be surrounded by devoted persons eager to be agreeable or useful to her. She herself wondered at this general good-nature. "I receive a thousand marks of friendship," she says; "I am quite ashamed of it. I know not what possesses people to esteem me so much." The explanation was, however, very near at hand,— she was beloved because she loved others. Whatever may be said, this is still the surest way to win hearts; people only returned to her what she gave. One of those who knew

her best, La Rochefoucauld, was in the habit of saying "that she satisfied his idea of friendship in all its conditions and consequences." It is unfortunate that La Rochefoucauld did not develop his opinion, and tell us by reason of what qualities Madame de Sévigné seemed to him to deserve this noble praise; we should then have had a treatise on friendship by a master-hand. What he neglected to do, no one can do to-day. At this distance from Madame de Sévigné, many things escape us that were obvious to the people of her time. Let us, however, question her letters, and seek to discover if possible some of the traits that so endeared her to her friends.

What strikes one at the outset is her general kindness, amiability, and good-will. The merit is the more remarkable, inasmuch as we are here dealing with an intimate correspondence in which she could freely open her heart. Pascal somewhere says: "Human life is a perpetual illusion; people do nothing but deceive and flatter one another. No one speaks of us in our presence as he speaks of us in our absence. The union existing between men is founded merely upon this mutual deceit; and few friendships would continue, could every one know what his friend says of him behind his back." It appears to me that the majority

of those of whom Madame de Sévigné speaks to her daughter could have read her letters without suffering any of those cruel wounds that cannot be pardoned. This is a test that few private correspondences would stand. When one thinks one's self sure of the person one addresses, when, trusting to his discretion, one reveals the fugitive impressions that cross the mind, how many ill-judged disclosures, how many unjust suspicions, how many baseless accusations, escape in a first impulse of anger,—how many unhandsome sayings which one cannot control, and which one would gladly withdraw as soon as uttered! Whatever may have been said, I see nothing, or next to nothing, of the kind in Madame de Sévigné. She had too keen a sense of humor not to perceive the eccentricities of her friends, but she touches them lightly; she is not always tender to the coxcombs who annoy her and to the bores who come to pester her; she sometimes tells a good story to amuse her daughter, and, once under way, her vivacity gets possession of her and carries her farther than she would have desired; but her mockery does not draw blood, like that of Bussy, and her jests are always softened by a smile. On the whole, I find no one, of all those she mentions in her correspondence, whom she thoroughly disliked. She

passes favorable judgments upon all her acquaintances; to her everybody is good,—“the altogether Good,” “the good Troche,” “the good D’Hacqueville,” “the good Marbeuf,” “the good Tarente;” to her the world is beautiful and its inhabitants good. I am aware that she became irritated one day, when in bad humor, by the optimism of Malebranche. “I should like to complain to Father Malebranche of the mice that devour everything here,—is that in accordance with the proper order of things? What! good sugar, fruit, preserves? And was it in order last year that hideous caterpillars should devour all the leaves of our forest and of our gardens, and all the fruits of the earth? And Father Païen, who gets knocked on the head as he is going home peaceably,—is that just as it should be?” But this is only a sullen fit; as a rule it does not appear to her that things are as bad as people pretend. She has none of those revolts against accepted opinions which are so common in more crabbed natures. “There is my old thesis again, for which they will stone me one of these days; namely, that the public is neither mad nor unjust.” Even when arrived at the decline of life, she judges the world without bitterness, and she casts no look of disappointment upon her past years. Upon

recalling, one day, certain unhappy experiences of her life, she remarked to her daughter: "Do you think my lot has been very happy? I am satisfied with it." Sometimes, indeed, she had at eventide "dark-gray thoughts, which at night became deep black." But she usually left these in her solitude, where they disturbed no one but herself. She was one of those persons who are stimulated by society, and who find themselves so happy in the companionship of friends, that they forget their sorrows and scatter joy wherever they go. She had a hearty laugh, and the most melancholy found her frank gayety infectious. She could relax the brow of Cardinal de Retz, that man of disappointed ambition; when she entered the garden of the Faubourg St. Germain, where morose La Rochefoucauld and discreet Madame de Lafayette were gloomily growing old together, she was like a ray of sunshine through the fog. There are people who are kind to all by reason of a sort of general indifference, and who receive everybody well because they are partial to none. Madame de Sévigné's friendship was, on the contrary, capable of a warmth that was at times surprising. Napoleon remarks, upon reading the letters she wrote to M. de Pomponne during the trial of Fouquet, that her interest in the Minister of

Finance is very warm, very keen, very tender, for simple friendship. This was her way of loving her friends; and there was in this case an especial reason that prevented restraint, and gave added vivacity to the expression of her feelings,—this friend was unfortunate.

Let us be mindful, in this connection, that Madame de Sévigné belongs, by her age and by her education, to the first half of the seventeenth century. She is one of those who first applauded Corneille's dramas, and who formed their minds and hearts upon the romances of La Calprenède and of Mademoiselle de Scudéry. These are, as literary works, very mediocre books; but they are pervaded by a certain ideal of courtesy and heroism that must have been attractive to a young heart. Long afterwards, in her lonely retreat at Les Rochers, she re-read "Cleopatra," and felt again all her early emotion. "La Calprenède's style is abominable in a thousand places," said she; "the long periods of the romance are full of barbarous words; I am aware of all that. The other day I wrote a very merry letter to my son in that style. Thus I think it wretched, and yet I cannot help being caught by it as by birdlime. The beauty of the sentiments, the violence of the passions, the grandeur of the incidents, and the miraculous success of

their formidable swords,— all this carries me away as if I were a little girl." These admirations of her youth left their mark upon her; they left her with a sort of natural taste for all that is great, daring, heroic. She likes to defy fortune; she feels a certain pride in not changing with fortune, and in remaining true to those whom fortune forsakes. When the finance minister was all-powerful, she had repelled him; when he was reduced to struggle for his life with biassed and hostile judges, she felt for him an affection bordering upon love. Likewise the disgrace of Pomponne rendered him dearer to her. "Misfortune shall not drive him from this house," said she when she heard of his dismissal; and she kept her word. In her letters, one feels her affection growing warmer in proportion as she sees him sadder and more forsaken. This generous devotion enhances her natural good-nature and kindness of heart, and gives those qualities an added charm. Is it surprising that, with such amiable traits, she should have been so much beloved?

IV.

IT seems to me that, in order to know Madame de Sévigné, it is not sufficient to study herself. We need a glimpse, at least, of some

of those she loved. So tenderly was she attached to them, that they form a part, as it were, of her very existence, so that she would be incomplete without them.

Let us begin this review of her intimates with those who were nearest her,—her children. Her son was the soul of honor and good-nature; and in all her correspondence there are few more attractive figures than his. He worshipped his mother, and never occasioned her any serious sorrow. I admit that she was sometimes pained to see him frequenting bad company and compromising reputation and health in gallant adventures; yet we find her rather easy-going about this. When she attempted to administer some reproof, the son retorted so gayly that the sermon usually ended with a burst of laughter. Moreover, when he came home to recover from his slight wound in the retirement of Les Rochers, he brought with him so much wit, so much good-nature, such conversational resources, so just an estimate of good books,—he was, in short, such excellent company, that Madame de Sévigné's affection for “the little friend” was deepened, and she could no longer do without him.

It appears to us that Charles de Sévigné ought to have been his mother's favorite child.

In the first place, he was a son; and we know the infinite indulgence shown by aristocratic families for him who is to continue the race. Besides, he was the best of sons, the most affectionate, the most docile. Assuredly Madame de Sévigné loved him well, but she loved her daughter better. Why? We do not know, and probably she did not know any better than we do. Nor did those who surrounded her understand it. Despite the care they took to humor her foible, we plainly see that her best friends, notably Madame de Lafayette, thought her to be in the wrong. Moralists tell us that the least rational and the most unreasonable passions are generally the strongest. That of Madame de Sévigné was of an extraordinary degree of violence. All the fervor of her soul was thrown into this feeling. Her maternal affection sometimes seemed to partake of the nature of love, of which it had the agitations and the storms; like love, it constituted the happiness and the torment of the heart which it entirely engrossed.

Madame de Grignan, the object of this passion, has been judged with much severity in her time and in our own. Bussy said of her: "This woman has wit, but a tart wit, alloyed with intolerable vanity. She will make as many enemies as her mother has made friends

and worshippers." Saint-Simon, who had been well acquainted with her son, the young Marquis de Grignan, treats her no better. It is unfortunate for her that the reading of Madame de Sévigné's letters does not seem calculated to soften this judgment. Notwithstanding all the praises she heaps upon her daughter, we obtain impressions unfavorable to the latter. The poor mother would be inconsolable could she see that she is the cause of the antipathy we feel for Madame de Grignan. It is certain that Madame de Sévigné has done her daughter's reputation great unintentional injury. We love the mother so much, she seems so kind, so gentle, so obliging, that we ask ourselves how a daughter who was the object of such worship and such adulation could have found any difficulty in agreeing with such a mother.

It is, however, not hard to understand when one considers how different they were. Glance at their two portraits, which are often set in the same frame; the contrast is complete. Nothing is more unlike that open, broad face, radiant with the mother's good-will, sincerity, and good-humor, than the slight, delicate, mincing features of the daughter. But there was still more diversity in their characters. Madame de Grignan united two de-

fects which seem opposed, but which are often found together,— pride and timidity. One who has great ambition and an exalted opinion of himself which he desires others to share, is always disturbed about what others think of him, and fears to risk anything for fear of not succeeding as well as he could wish. In her youth Madame de Grignan was apt to blush at the least word that was said to her; and she was so much annoyed by this that she would leave a ball-room rather than let malicious people discover her embarrassment. Time and intercourse with the great world never gave her perfect self-possession. One day, at cards, she became so much embarrassed that she threw all the stakes upon the floor, whereupon the Duke pitilessly ridiculed her. This was "one of those cruel little incidents" that are so keenly felt at court. Usually, timid people wear a mask of pride. To hide their timidity, of which they are ashamed, they assume an air of insolence. Their reserve, which usually springs from their embarrassment, seems to arise from the contempt they feel for others. Madame de Grignan passed for a very disdainful person, even in the eyes of those most intimate with her. Her husband, before taking her with him to the seat of his government, said in confidence to Madame de

Sévigné, "Madame, she will not condescend to look at the poor women of Provence." Haughty people, or those who pass for such, are generally detested. Madame de Grignan well knew that she was not liked, and she complained of it to her mother, who only partially reassured her. This sense of being misjudged rendered her bitter and ill-natured. As people were ungentle toward her, she in her turn was severe toward others. She spoke well of few persons, and spared not even her mother's best friends. She did not relish the wit of Madame de Lafayette; the Duke de Chaulnes seemed to her an ill-bred man; she managed to find it dull with Coulanges; she teased Corbinelli; she rudely refused a present from Cardinal de Retz, who had called her his dear niece and meant to make her his heiress. These were reprisals for the harsh judgments which she knew people passed upon her; she avenged herself for the world's opinion by deserving it.

How far is this from the large-heartedness of Madame de Sévigné,—from her habit of looking at everything in the best light, and of judging people only by their good sides! She, at least, was neither vain nor timid; she did not trouble herself beforehand concerning the impression she might make. When she needed

to write or speak she "opened the floodgates," and everything that came into her mind, everything she had upon her heart, escaped at once. Madame de Grignan, on the contrary, felt a kind of constriction of soul that checked the free flow of her feelings. She herself said that she was "of an uncommunicative temperament;" this phrase, of which we make so much use to-day, and which she was one of the first to employ, fits her perfectly. She could not talk before her mother; she seemed embarrassed, indifferent; she knew not how to respond to the proofs of friendship with which she felt herself hampered. Later on, when alone, and away from the presence that paralyzed her, she regained her freedom of mind, and words of affection flowed from her pen. "Cruel child," wrote Madame de Sévigné to her, "why do you hide from me such precious treasures? Are you afraid that I should die of joy?" A lukewarm person is naturally embarrassed by the warmth of others; he feels a sort of shame in receiving marks of affection to which he cannot wholly respond. Madame de Grignan became at length a little tired of her mother's exuberant affection. "There are people," Madame de Sévigné wrote her, "who have hinted to me that my excessive love annoys you. I know not, my dear

child, if this be true; but I can assure you that I have been far from wishing to give you such pain as this. I admit that I have followed my inclination somewhat freely, and have seen you as much as possible, not having had self-restraint enough to deny myself that pleasure; but I did not think I had been burdensome." She was so sometimes, unwittingly. Pascal has said that in love tact is requisite; but he is capable of little tact who loves to excess. Instead of moderating and restraining the violence of her affection, the poor mother could do nothing but groan and weep, so that living together became intolerable. During the winter of 1676, after an absence of some two years, Madame de Grignan had returned to visit her mother at Paris. At that time, unfortunately, neither was very well; the daughter was suffering with her chest, the mother was slowly recovering from an attack of rheumatism. Each being anxious about the other, they wore each other out with their mutual solicitudes; it was an existence of unremitting watchfulness, apprehensions, extravagant precautions, endless complaints, continual reproaches. On the plea of getting well sooner, they made each other worse, (depriving themselves of that peace of mind) in which health half consists. Charles de

Sévigné, himself ill of a wound he had received at the siege of Valenciennes, told his sister how his mother and he arranged to nurse each other, and, with his kindly good-sense, gave her in this connection a little lesson:—

“We nurse one another, each granting the other a suitable degree of freedom; no petty womanish nostrums. ‘You feel well, dear mother? I am delighted. Did you sleep well last night? How does your head feel? What, no nervousness? Heaven be praised. Go take the air; go to St. Maur and dine with Madame de Schomberg; take a walk in the Garden of the Tuileries. There’s nothing ails you; I leave you perfectly free. Do you wish to eat strawberries or to take some tea? The strawberries are better for you. Good-by, mother.—My heel hurts me; you shall nurse me, if you will, from noon till three o’clock, then *away with you!*’ Such, little sister, is the way sensible people treat each other.” But they were not at all sensible, and the mutual worry went at last so far that they were obliged to part. “I am beside myself,” wrote Madame de Sévigné, “when they come to me and say, ‘You are killing each other; you must separate.’ That is a fine remedy, indeed!” It was true, nevertheless, that they were killing each other; and whatever Madame de Sévigné thought of the

separation, it turned out to be efficacious in her daughter's case. Scarcely had she left Paris, when she felt herself convalescent; and by the time she reached Grignan she was cured.

What rent the heart of Madame de Sévigné was, that at times, after such scenes, she came to think that her daughter "had an aversion for her." This was an injustice to Madame de Grignan, who loved her mother. "I think," she wrote to Bussy, "that this is my best side." But her way of loving was not that of Madame de Sévigné. That this affection, though calmer, was not less real, appears from the fact that when the hour of parting came there were tears on both sides. "You wept, my dearest," wrote Madame de Sévigné to her daughter the day after her departure, "and that means much for you; for me it is not the same thing,—it is my temperament." Then began on both sides an interminable correspondence. Let it be borne in mind that for twenty-five years Madame de Grignan never missed a post unless hindered by illness. Year in and year out, whatever her occupations, she addressed to her mother, twice a week, letters which the latter, when she considered the time and trouble they must cost, thought much too long, and which she entreated her daughter to make shorter,

notwithstanding the pleasure the reading gave. These letters must have been much more tender and affectionate than we suppose, since they satisfied the exacting love of Madame de Sévigné. It is probable that Madame de Grignan's timidity disappeared at a distance; when no longer in the presence of her loved ones, she was not ashamed to be natural. She then ventured to disclose her real feelings; and the enraptured mother said to her, "When you will, you are adorable."

I am, then, inclined to believe that we should have a higher opinion of Madame de Grignan if we could read her letters; the destruction of them was a wrong to her. Perhaps in reality she was less selfish, less indifferent, than she is judged to have been; the indifferent do not suffer, and she seems to have suffered much. Madame de Sévigné often admires her daughter's depth, energy, solidity, and places her, on that score, much above herself. I do not think these compliments altogether deserved. We are usually referred, as a sign of a bold, firm judgment, to her audacities of opinion, to her philosophic escapades in the doctrine of Descartes, to her slight tendency to heresy. I confess that I see in this rather the restlessness of an unbalanced mind, a need,

as it were, of fighting the wind. Hers was, at bottom, a sick, uneasy soul, feeding upon illusions. Compelled by duty to live in society, she dreamed only of solitude; she looked habitually upon the darker side, and found in all things a subject for vexation of spirit. Her mother reproached her with having a sort of relish for despair and gloom; she already made one of that company of the disenchanted and the hopeless which has since grown so numerous. Instead of censuring her, as is usually done, we ought perhaps to be a little sorry for her. I fancy her one of those unhappy natures fated, while tormenting themselves, to be the torment of others.

V.

HER daughter and her son excepted, no one had a larger part in Madame de Sévigné's life than her cousin, Count de Bussy-Rabutin. Were we to consider him on every side, we should have much to say of him; he is one of the most curious personages of the seventeenth century. Let us confine ourselves as far as possible to what it is needful to know in order to understand his relations with his cousin.

Few persons have made their entrance into life in so noisy a way as Bussy. A soldier at sixteen, and from the first distinguished for his cool daring, he takes command of his father's regiment at eighteen, and is already a notorious roisterer. At twenty he is appointed colonel of infantry; he has his duels and his love adventures; no one doubts that he is on the high-road to fortune,—himself least of all. Circumstances are favorable: an important war has begun, which brings men of courage to the front; there is promise of a glorious reign, and men feel the approach of great events. Great changes are taking place, manners and opinions are being renewed, and already the actors appear who are to play the leading parts upon this renovated stage. Impatient to be assigned his part, Bussy tries every means of attracting attention: he adopts the fashionable qualities, and especially the fashionable vices; he startles, he surprises, if need be he shocks; he compels people to talk about him. Among his methods of getting himself into notice, there is one of which he certainly would not have thought a few years earlier. He wishes to pass for an accomplished man of letters; he makes verses which he gives his friends—especially his lady friends—to read, and he composes a

novel which he circulates in fashionable society. This is a sign of the times: literature is becoming a power, and Bussy makes use of it to bring himself into credit.- At the outset fortune smiles upon him: he is appointed lieutenant-general; he commands the light horse under Turenne; he becomes a member of the French Academy. Suddenly, however, the publication of his "Amorous Chronicle of the Gauls," in which the most important personages in the kingdom are abused, arouses the wrath of his victims; he is shut up in the Bastille for thirteen months, then exiled to his estate, where he remained for seventeen years before getting leave to return to Paris.

It was in this book that he placed the portrait of Madame de Sévigné from which I have already quoted some passages. This portrait is herein remarkable,—that while nothing in it is altogether accurate, nothing in it is altogether false. The features, taken singly, are coarsened and distorted, and yet a general resemblance is traceable. Thus it was calculated to gratify the spirit of mischief in everybody: it contained enough untruth to divert the malicious, and enough truth to enable friends to laugh without stint; even the good Corbinelli acknowledges that he could not read the book without laughing. The wrath of

Madame de Sévigné at finding herself in print, and in the hands of the public, greatly surprised Bussy; he was one of those persons who, prompt to forget the mischief they have done, are astonished that those should remember it who have suffered by it. Finally, however, he sought and obtained his cousin's forgiveness, and they renewed a correspondence which continued unbroken to the last.

It is by the help of this correspondence that we can follow Bussy into his exile. We know that he did not bear it with fortitude, and this could hardly have surprised those who thoroughly knew him. In him, all was upon the surface; he had more vanity than ambition, loved notoriety rather than fame, and, despite the swaggering airs he was fond of assuming, was wanting in genuine energy. At times he felt it to be his cue to strike an attitude of resignation and to recite some of those fine phrases which fools accept as verities. "Since I know," he wrote, "that a man must go to his death wherever he may be, I had as lief start from Burgundy upon that journey as from Paris or from St. Germain." In reality, he intends that death shall find him, not in Burgundy, but at St. Germain or at Paris. His hope is based upon a bit of reasoning to which he tenaciously clings, and

which he often repeats to his friends. Everything comes about, he tells them, and nothing abides; there is no good luck or bad luck that is eternal. If the fortunate man must always fear, the unfortunate may always hope. Some day his turn will come; the main thing is, not to die before that day arrives. The whole wisdom of an exile consists, accordingly, in taking care of himself in order that he may not miss his good fortune. To this Bussy looked well, endeavoring so far as might be to shun all emotions injurious to his health. When he lost the Marquis de Vardes, one of his best friends, he contented himself with writing to Corbinelli: "After having sincerely mourned him, let us both endeavor not to follow him too soon." But he could not help feeling that the day to which he looked forward with such confidence, that day of amends and of justice, was long in coming; more than once his patience fails, the mask of resignation drops, and the inward acrimony shows itself in violent satirical strokes. At such times he attacks the king's favorites, his mistresses, his ministers. Here is his pithy funeral oration over Colbert: "Seven stones were found in his kidney, a circumstance less surprising to me than that none were found in his heart." The death of Madame de Seignelay, at the

age of eighteen, draws from him this burst of savage exultation: "We unfortunates should be in despair did not God treat us, from time to time, to the death of some minister."

Such strokes are rare in his correspondence, and I confess that I regret it; I like him better rebellious than submissive. I cannot abide his apparent resignation, belied as it is by his continual efforts to disarm his enemies and to deserve pardon. It must be admitted that his situation was very delicate, and that he was sensible of all its difficulties. He knew that he was not generally liked; being infatuated with his nobility and with his desert, bitter, punctilious, he lived on good terms with nobody. He fell out one day with Marshal de Bellefonds because the latter, in writing to him, had made use of this phrase: "I beg you to keep me in kind remembrance." It should have been, "the honor of your kind remembrance." The "Amorous Chronicle of the Gauls" had obtained a very great success, but a success of that scandalous kind which multiplies readers for the book and enemies for the author. One had only to read it to be confirmed in the opinion that Bussy was an intolerable scoffer who respected nothing. We cannot conceive, to-day, how one could thus be permitted to reveal to the public the pri-

vate life of the leaders of society; to relate their adventures seasoned with disgusting details borrowed from the most cynical writers of antiquity. Ruined in reputation as were the Countess d'Olonne and the Duchess de Châtillon, they belonged to the first families in the kingdom; they had husbands, relatives, whom their dishonor must cover with shame. How was it possible that a man should openly declare, in a book accessible to everybody, that they were dissolute, faithless, mercenary; that they changed their lovers as their whims or their needs might dictate; that they sold themselves at the rate of two thousand pistoles to farmers of the revenue who could boast neither of birth nor of honor? In this satirical romance nobody is spared, — not the Prince de Marcillac, who is exhibited as crushing his enemies, like Samson, "with his ass's jaw;" not the Counts de Guiche and de Manicamp, to whom the most shameful vices are attributed; not the Prince de Condé, "a born scamp, insolent, reckless;" not the Duchess de Longueville, "who was untidy and smelt bad." When it was seen that Bussy was running amuck against everybody, each trembled for himself, and all applauded the punishment of an insolence from which none felt himself secure. Bussy felt, therefore, that he was not sup-

ported by the opinion of his contemporaries, and his vexation was not lessened by the foreboding that he could count with as little safety upon the good-will of posterity. He had no hope, he said to Madame de Sévigné, that history would treat him better than fortune had done, "because they who write it are pensioners of the court, and base their books merely upon ministerial reports." He has been still more unfortunate than he anticipated. He has been severely dealt with not merely by the official historians, but by independent writers who had nothing to expect from the court, and who detested the ministers. Saint-Evremond, who was also exiled, and for less solid reasons, did not spare him. "He preferred," says Saint-Evremond, "to his own promotion the pleasure of writing a book, and of making people laugh; he wished to make a merit of his freedom of speech, and did not play his part to the end. When a man misses his fortune by his own act, doing with malice prepense all that M. de Bussy did, he should pass the rest of his days in retirement, and sustain with a little dignity the awkward rôle he has been ill-advised enough to assume." Saint-Simon, who is no more suspected of servility than Saint-Evremond, and who does not rely upon the ministerial reports, encountering Bussy in

his pathway, simply says of him that “he is known by his ‘Amorous Chronicle of the Gauls,’ and better still by the vanity of his mind and the meanness of his spirit.”

He spent the seventeen years of his exile in his Burgundian estates at Chaseu, at Forléans, at Bussy. By a rare and fortunate chance the chateau at Bussy is to-day very much in the state in which its master left it. He boasts in his letters of having made it “one of the finest mansions in France;” we think the praise somewhat excessive. It is a rather heavy structure overlooking a monotonous little valley surrounded by heights which are not mountains, and washed by watercourses which are not rivers. In front of the chateau stretches a park set with fine trees ; but it is so broken into hill and dale that it is impossible to obtain a complete view of it. On the other side a rather shabby lawn, with narrow, straight walks and a scanty rivulet, forms a terrace affording a prospect of a featureless, commonplace horizon. Some houses of the wretched village cluster about the foot of the chateau ; the rest are scattered in the plain, or rise in tiers upon the hillside, so that one really finds here neither the stern beauty of solitude nor the bustle and stir of life. But Bussy was no friend of Nature. I fancy that the view to be obtained from the

windows of his chateau was a matter of indifference to him, and that he took walks in his park solely for hygienic purposes.

What could an exile, who could not endure the country, do to fill the vacancy of the long days passed in such a wilderness? He tells us more than once in his correspondence. As soon as he reached Burgundy, after his release from the Bastille, he summoned from Dijon, even from Paris, artists of all kinds, especially architects and painters, and set about decorating his drawing-rooms. The drawing-room,—this is the place people liked best in the seventeenth century, the place which recalled life's happiest hours spent in delightful companionship with the amiable and the witty. Accordingly, in order to please this worldly society, Le Nôtre made of the Park of Versailles a kind of reproduction of the palace itself, with long galleries vaulted by overarching trees, and leading to cabinets and halls of verdure. Bussy's fashion of decorating his house reveals his then condition of mind, and what it was that absorbed all his thoughts: he was feeding upon memories and regrets; he was dreaming only of that seductive world from which he was banished; and he was determined, cost what it might, to have an image of that world before his eyes. Several rooms are decorated

with emblems and allegorical designs, almost all relating to his mistress, the beautiful Marchioness de Montglas. Bussy, who taxed her with forsaking him in his fall, who had her depicted as lighter than the breeze, fickler than the moon, flightier than the swallow, shows by the animosity with which he kept her in view how much he still loved her. He gathered in one of his *salons* the portraits of the great captains of his time, and unceremoniously thrust himself into their company. Elsewhere he placed portraits of all the women with whom he had been intimate, with inscriptions which are often epigrams. Doubtless it seemed to him that he was not wholly shut out from Paris and Versailles when he found himself surrounded by all these familiar faces, recalling to him his happier years. As he looked upon them he became the willing victim of illusion, and for the moment forgot his exile.

Another link between himself and the world from which he was banished, was his correspondence. Every post brought him letters from the few whose friendship he had kept. These were for the most part women, who, little as he had spared them, proved more faithful than the men ; besides these, there were a few of that small class of courtiers who remember their fallen companions, and some collegiate

and academic wits much honored to be in correspondence with a great lord who prided himself upon his love of letters. These letters were impatiently awaited. They brought him some far-off echo of the noises of the world toward which his ear was continually bent. But if their perusal satisfied his curiosity, what cruel wounds must they have inflicted upon his pride! How galling to hear of the successes of his former rivals,—men who had served with him and under him, to whom he felt himself superior, and who were one after another succeeding to the highest dignities of the State! What mortification to run through those lists of marshals of France, those promotions of Knights of the Order, in which his own name was missing! And when they told him the story of battles won, of provinces conquered, of coalitions defeated, how exasperating to a vain man, who deemed himself born to command armies and to gain victories, to behold all these great things achieved without his help! It is easy to fancy the pangs that then rent Bussy's breast, and one feels ready to pardon the desperate efforts he made to regain favor.

VI.

AMONG the faithful correspondents who undertook to send Bussy the news of Paris and of the court, Madame de Sévigné must be placed in the front rank. She liked to write to him and to receive his letters; she found that her cousin's mind aroused and kindled her own; his sharp wit stimulated her; and in replying to him, she enjoyed one of the delights to which we are most alive,—that of being satisfied with ourselves.

Nevertheless she had friends whom she loved better, and to whom she abandoned herself more unreservedly. I might mention many of whom she is continually talking; but, mindful of necessary limits, I shall content myself with speaking only of the best known, of those who held the largest place in her life,—first of Madame de Lafayette and of La Rochefoucauld, next of Monsieur and Madame de Coulanges.

In 1693, when Madame de Lafayette died, Madame de Sévigné said that their friendship had lasted more than forty years. She therefore placed its beginning at about the time when Madame de La Vergne, the mother of Madame de Lafayette, married in second nuptials the Chevalier Renaud de Sévigné. Then

it was that the daughter of Madame de La Vergne and Henri de Sévigné's young wife, between whom there was no great disparity of age and tastes, felt drawn to one another. Of those remote and early years we know little, and I do not wish to speak of them. When Madame de Sévigné's correspondence with her daughter begins, Madame de Lafayette has been long a widow, and has but recently united herself with the Duke de La Rochefoucauld in that close intimacy which gave the world so much to talk about.

What can have been the nature of this intimacy? The question is very indiscreet, I acknowledge, yet it is difficult to avoid making some answer. The question was raised by the malicious curiosity of their contemporaries. Madame de Scudéry wrote to Bussy: "M. de La Rochefoucauld is living very decorously with Madame de Lafayette; nothing more than friendship is apparent. In short, the fear of the Lord on the part of each, and perhaps also policy, have clipped Cupid's wings. She is his favorite and his best friend." But the distrustful Bussy suspected something more. "For my part," he replied, "I still maintain there is love between them." Perhaps it would not be wise to attempt to canvass this delicate subject too closely. If, as Sainte-Beuve thinks,

their union began in 1665, La Rochefoucauld was then fifty-two years old and Madame de Lafayette thirty-two. Strictly speaking, such an age permits any supposition; but it must be noted that La Rochefoucauld had been worn out by a long life of fruitless agitation and disappointed ambition. As to Madame de Lafayette, she had certainly been animated and gay in her early youth; time had been when, amid a circle of trusty friends, she had sometimes thrown off constraint and emancipated herself. Long afterwards, Madame de Sévigné recalled this to her daughter: "Despite her discretion, we laughed and had our frolics; do you recollect it?" But discretion had soon carried the day; and when La Rochefoucauld met her in Madame de Sablé's *salon*, she was, notwithstanding her thirty summers, a mature and sober woman. I fancy that the intimacy must have grown up gradually. Neither was of an age or a temperament to feel one of those violent and inevitable passions born at first sight. He doubtless noted the justice of the reflections made by this young woman; he was struck with her perfect knowledge of the world, and with her firm, clear judgments of men and events. On the other hand, we may believe that when she perceived the impression she was making upon so

distinguished a man, who had played an important part in public affairs, she was very much flattered. At the outset, therefore, their alliance was largely an affair of the intellect, but the heart did not remain a stranger to it. M. de La Rochefoucauld was not born for those extreme passions in which the chance of his romantic adventures had at one time involved him. Madame de Sévigné justly remarked of him: "I do not believe he has ever been what is called a lover." Not until the age of fifty-two did he test his full capacity for love. Although his life had been a very full one, Madame de Lafayette opened up to him new vistas. She kindled within him a temperate and rational affection,—the only kind quite natural to them both,—and this affection brightened their declining years. There is, after all, much charm in these late, stormless loves, capable as they are of the sober splendor and mild warmth of an autumnal sunset. "I think," said Madame de Sévigné, "that nothing can surpass the strength of such an alliance." From that time they never parted. Gourville, who detests Madame de Lafayette, hints that she took entire possession of La Rochefoucauld. It is certain that she was by nature imperious and commanding, and that she put her friends more or less under the

yoke; but in this case the yoke was unresistingly accepted. There are thraldoms to which one is happy to yield; moreover, we know that Madame de Lafayette exerted her power only to soften and to reconcile to mankind the bitter moralist who had just composed his "Maxims." It was in the height of this union that "The Princess of Cleves" appeared under the name of Segrais. Everybody knew that this name concealed that of Madame de Lafayette, and many suspected that La Rochefoucauld must have had some hand in it. Here is what the pious Madame de Scudéry wrote to Bussy: "M. de La Rochefoucauld and Madame de Lafayette have made a romance dealing with the gallant adventures of the court of Henry the Second; they are not of an age to occupy themselves otherwise together." It is impossible to ascertain at this day whether La Rochefoucauld helped Madame de Lafayette with "The Princess of Cleves," or what part of the work may belong to him. All that can be said is, that his union with the author seems to have left some trace upon this charming work, and that while reading it one guesses the mental condition of the writer. It seems pervaded with the tranquillity of a heart happy in a requited affection; from the peace she has attained she looks with

kindly and tender sympathy upon the unhappy passions of others, and sheds over the objects of her dreams that mild and equable light which now shines about her own pathway.

Less happy were the following years. Age crept upon them, with its inevitable ailments. La Rochefoucauld was pinned to his arm-chair by the gout. Madame de Lafayette, constantly at death's door, could form no plan for the morrow. She relates that, having set out one day for Chantilly, where she was expected by the Prince, the fever overtook her on the Pont-Neuf, and she could go no farther. This condition rendered them the more necessary to each other. As their ill health forced them to shun society, they arranged more than ever to be mutually sufficient. Madame de Sévigné, who saw them more regularly after they were more alone and more gloomy, tells us "that nothing could be compared to the confidence and the charm of their friendship."

To pass from Madame de Lafayette and La Rochefoucauld to Monsieur and Madame de Coulanges, is going from one extreme to the other. The latter are no less gay, bustling, animated, than the former are serious and grave. This charming pair are the embodiment of movement and life. It is impossible to have more wit than they,—a wit all

sparkle and flash, always armed and ready with a repartee. In the conversation both of the husband and of the wife, epigrams fly off like sparks. Tedium cannot exist in their presence; accordingly every one loves them, seeks them, invites them, and desires to keep them. Nevertheless, on looking closer one perceives that they are not on the best footing together. When alone, these laughers grow grave, these inexhaustible talkers find nothing to say to each other; so they stay at home as little as possible. Having no child to detain them, they are almost unoccupied: the wife takes little interest in her household; the husband, who has been successively counsellor and referendary in the Parliament of Paris, excuses himself as much as possible from sitting. They are always in the street or on the road. She frequents the Parisian salons and makes visits to Versailles, where she has great relations of whom she is rather proud,—the Louvois, who are of her family; the Duchess de Richelieu; above all, Madame de Maintenon, who much relishes the wit of Madame de Coulanges. He permits himself longer escapades; he goes to pass whole seasons in the castles of great lords, whom he amuses. On one occasion he goes to Germany with M. de Lyonne; later he accompa-

nies the Duke de Chaulnes in his embassy to Rome, is present at two conclaves, and remains in Italy more than two years. At the time when Madame de Sévigné's correspondence acquaints us somewhat closely with them, they have been married for seven or eight years, and their relation is already what it will be to the end: each goes his own way, and both have got thoroughly used to this separation under the same roof. Was this brought about without a struggle? We do not know; but I cannot imagine that a scandalous scene should ever have arisen between persons so well-bred, so hostile to clamor, so tolerant by nature. It is more likely that when they found less pleasure in living together they quietly withdrew, and that, the separation being gradual, there was neither rupture nor violence. It is thus that the slow cooling of a liquid in a vase does not burst the fragile vessel. But how came it that two amiable characters, who were so much alike, did not suit each other better? Is it not that they were too much alike? If contrary natures are liable to jar, perhaps it is difficult for those who are too much alike to agree perfectly. It is better that between persons destined to live together there should be sufficient resemblance, in order that each may understand the other; and sufficient difference, in order that

each may feel the need of the other to make good his deficiencies. Still, it remains true that in this rather ill-assorted union mutual esteem had survived; between this husband and this wife, who were so only in name, there even remained a residue of friendship and confidence. Perhaps, therefore, it may be inferred that there never was a very strong affection between them; for, according to Bussy's sagacious remark, people pass from violent love to hatred rather than to friendship. In a very serious illness which Madame de Coulanges suffered, people were touched to see the husband show marks of the deepest grief, while the wife, who was thought to be dying, concerned herself only for her husband. It is true that when she was out of danger everything began again as usual. This mixture of reciprocal attentions and mutual indifference, of complete separation at home and a decorous appearance in public, forms a very curious contrast; does it not seem like a glimpse in advance of a fashionable household of the eighteenth century?

To the similarity an important feature is, however, lacking. This easy husband who shuns his home is not known to have a mistress. He seems not to have formed one of those irregular unions that take the place of

family life. He loves above all things good cheer, highly-seasoned conversation, boon companionship. Wherever he is received he makes himself at home. Agreeable at first, he soon becomes necessary ; but while amusing others he amuses himself, and this existence, which would not be to the liking of every one, fully satisfies him. He had, indeed, some crosses, — who can wholly avoid them ? Once he was induced to apply for an important situation in the treasury, and though he was a relative of Louvois, he did not get it. Despite his philosophy he felt this mishap ; but his vexation was brief, and he consoled himself, in his usual way, with songs : —

“ Fortune, thou hast given me words,
But hast not been ruthless to me ; ”

then he threw himself more than ever into his life of merry vagabondage. “ What a delightful life,” wrote Madame de Sévigné to him, “ and how gently fortune has dealt with you ! Always loved, always esteemed, always bringing with you joy and pleasure, always a favorite, and infatuated with some great friend, — a duke, a prince, a pope (I add the Holy Father for the rarity of it), — always in health, never a burden to any one, no business, no ambition ; but above all, what an advantage not to grow

old! This is the height of happiness. Certain reckonings of times and years touch you indeed a little, but only distantly, and without the terror which they bring to some persons I know of; all this is for your neighbor, and you are not subject even to the uneasiness of an ordinary person who sees a fire in his neighborhood. In fine, having thought it all over, I conclude that you are the happiest man in the world."

And Madame de Coulanges,—was she content with the life that satisfied her husband? How did she accept the isolation in which he left her? Was there no one to take advantage of the opportunity to fill the vacant place? Saint-Simon, who is not suspected of flattery, tells us that she was always virtuous; and we may believe him. Not that she lacked worshippers willing to console her for the absences of her husband. Madame de Sévigné mentions three who paid assiduous court to her. First, there was the Abbé Têtû,—a wit among the ladies, with whom he was a great favorite, and a bone of contention between the *salons*. He made a regular division of his time. During the fine season he disappeared, going to keep company with the charming Abbess de Fontevrault. With the bad weather he returned to take up his winter-quarters, as he

said, at the house of Madame de Coulanges. Although often imperious and jealous, the Abbé Têtu had the advantage of not compromising the ladies to whom he devoted himself; they knew that all his passion was spent in tender conversations, and that he would not go beyond the madrigal. The next suitor was still less dangerous. This was the Count de Brancas,—an original over whom Madame de Sévigné often makes merry. He united the rôles of love and piety, and endeavored to please Madame de Coulanges only in order to aid her in seeking her soul's salvation. She preferred to seek it alone, and liked to laugh at this mystical wooer, who in his declarations mingled theology with gallantry, like Tartuffe. There was more to be feared from the third,—the Marquis de La Trousse, cousin of Coulanges, and one of the king's best officers. Of his cousin's wife he was desperately enamoured, and when he could come to Paris he scarcely left her side. But she treated him no better than she did the others. "He is always devoted," said Madame de Sévigné, "and she is always hard, contemptuous, and bitter." The control of these three lovers was diverting to Madame de Coulanges, who enjoyed setting them at loggerheads. What is more singular is, that the husband was also amused

by this, and that he took pleasure in noting the progress and the vicissitudes of each, and in celebrating them in his songs: —

“ Brancas flees Têtû, priest-pursued ;
La Trousse by some charm is subdued,
He alone fulfils all her desires.
Her husband quires, —
Têtû from Brancas takes the palm,
La Trousse is subdued by some charm.

Here is a husband of rare disinterestedness and tolerance! Madame de Sévigné was not far wrong in saying, at the moment when he was setting out for Rome: “ His wife has no especial reason to wish him to take this journey, for he does not in the least inconvenience her.”

For the rest, it is probable that the husband’s confidence was not betrayed. Madame de Coulanges amused herself in sportive flirtation, but, as we have seen, Saint-Simon affirms that she went no farther. There were moments, perhaps, when she regretted this reserve; it is possible that beyond these futile intimacies she caught a glimpse of some deeper affection that would have brought her the experience of unknown sentiments. In one of her letters there is a phrase that gives food for reflection. It is with reference to the Marquis de Villeroy, the “ charming,” as he

was called, who was desperately in love with a woman that jilted him. "Every one thinks him," she said, "an object of pity; to me he is an object of envy." It seems to me that to one who reads between the lines these words disclose a shade of regret. Certainly, however, her disposition did not draw her toward the vortex of the deep passions; during the dangerous years her safety lay in the levity of her character. Toward the last she became serious and devout. We have a letter wherein she takes her husband to task for his truant disposition and his incorrigible boyishness. "For my part," she declares, "I acknowledge that I think myself little mindful of the world. By my age I find myself no longer suited to society; I am free, thank God, from all the ties that hold us to the world in our own despite; I have seen all that it has to offer, and I have no longer anything but my old face to present to it,—nothing new either to communicate or to discover. And why eternally renew visits and trouble ourselves about occurrences that concern us not? My dear sir, it is time for us to be thinking of something more abiding."

Madame de Lafayette and Madame de Coulanges were Madame de Sévigné's best friends. Doubtless she may sometimes have suffered

from the exacting disposition of the one, and her patience was often tasked by the levity of the other; but notwithstanding their foibles she tenderly loved them both. Touching Madame de Lafayette she said, "Never has there been the least cloud upon our friendship;" of Madame de Coulanges she might have said the same thing. On the other hand, both her friends felt the full charm and solidity of her love. Madame de Lafayette, when upon the brink of death, wrote to her: "Let the end come when God will; I am resigned. Believe, my very dear friend, that you are the one person in the world whom I have most truly loved." Madame de Coulanges had the misfortune to survive her, and she felt this loss very keenly. When apprised of her death, Madame de Coulanges wrote: "She was the last of my friends;" and a year later: "My grief is ever fresh at seeing her no more; too many things are missing at Carnavalet House!" What an honor to Madame de Sévigné to have won the equal love of two persons of such opposite tempers! This, certainly, is what gives us the best opinion of her.

PART II.

THE WRITER.

I.

COUSIN points out that in the first half of the seventeenth century letter-writing became very fashionable. Letters, with portraits and conversations, take up much space in the romances of the period, and in those of Mademoiselle de Scudéry they are even printed in special type to attract the eye. This fashion is easily understood. A fondness for self-revelation and self-display is a very common infirmity, and in a correspondence this is what is wanted. Egotism here has free course and is perfectly in place; what may be a defect elsewhere becomes a necessity here, an essential feature of the style. People like to write letters because they can be as egotistic as they please, and like to read them because of their delight in fathoming the souls of others. It affords great pleasure to become acquainted with their most secret thoughts, especially when they would not have them known. Thus

it is that the epistolary style is sure to please the vain and inquisitive, — and that means almost everybody.

This, doubtless, is why Balzac and Voiture gave to their chief works the form of letters, — though unhappily nothing but the form. If you read through the correspondence of Voiture, in which he is constantly talking of himself, when you have done you will not know whence he came, what he was doing, how he was entitled to be received into the society in which we see him occupying so important a place, why he stays in Paris and why he leaves it, or what he is about in those distant lands from which he writes so many letters to his friends. He never makes known to us his real sentiments. He belongs to a society in which every one plays a part, and plays it consistently. The cast contains the rôles of the lover, the wag, the melancholy man, the coquette, the indifferent woman, the haughty lady. What each person is once he never ceases to be, or at least to seem to be; and whether talking or writing, each always plays his part. It was the understanding that Voiture should be the unhappy lover of the cruel Mademoiselle Paulet, the beautiful lioness, as she is called; and he regularly performed this duty while he made his abode at the Rambouillet mansion. Even

foreign travel did not interrupt his attentions. From Brussels, Rome, Madrid, he unweariedly continued sending her the insipid compliments then in style. One day he wrote her from Ceuta: "I have left Europe, and have crossed the strait which bounds it; but the sea between us can quench none of my passion for you, and though all the slaves of Christendom become free when they reach this shore, I am no less yours for all that." It need hardly be said that he does not believe one word of all these fine sentiments which he utters in so candid a tone. It is a mere social amusement deceiving no one; a sort of literary exercise that may seem interesting, but in which there is nothing serious or sincere.

Thus, however great the success of Voiture's letters, it would seem that in reading them it must have been felt that there was something lacking. Even those most charmed by them would doubtless say to themselves that such compositions would be much more charming still if they were real letters in which the writer, sure of not being betrayed, should give us his confidence, tell us his feelings and his thoughts, instead of expressing conventional sentiments, — in a word, disclose his real self. If, moreover, such a person chanced to write with talent, if by a natural gift he associated with a

fluent pen qualities ordinarily due only to labor, there would remain nothing more to be desired. That the intelligent people of this time had such an ideal of a perfect correspondence, and perceived that besides the letters of Voiture, so much read and admired, there were others still more admirable, uniting the merit of sincerity to that of style, is proved by the fact that as soon as Madame de Sévigné's letters were placed in their hands they did not hesitate; they recognized at once that here was perfection. Never, perhaps, has public opinion been so prompt and so unanimous in greeting a masterpiece. When, after the death of Bussy-Rabutin, his daughter had his correspondence published, every one was in raptures over the letters he had received from his cousin. Bayle was so charmed by them that he declared "this woman deserves a place among the famous women of her time." About the same period a Jesuit published a Latin poem entitled "Ratio Conscribendæ Epistolæ,"¹ in which he proclaimed that Madame de Sévigné was the model for that style of composition, and that she wrote with such ease "that one of her letters deserves the expenditure of more time on the part of the reader than it took her to write it."

¹ "The Best Way to Write a Letter."

This Jesuit seems to have imagined Madame de Sévigné as dashing off her letters at a sitting, without taking pains to polish and correct them; and, indeed, this is what she herself gives us to understand when she tells us that she lets her pen run on and gives it free rein. Generally her word has been believed; but there are doubters to whom such a method of composing masterpieces has seemed suspicious. The very merit of her letters makes such critics suspect that they cost her more labor than she pretends. The winning grace of her details, the ingenious turn given to her reflections, her charming variety in the repetition of the same thought, her clever expression of matters pertaining to the affections, seem to betray art and labor. "So much ingenuity," it has been said, "so much care, was probably not expended for one person alone. A lady does not write so elaborately to her daughter. Usually she keeps for her family her ordinary every-day wits, and is seldom very fastidious except for strangers and the public. It is then for these that Madame de Sévigné wrote under her daughter's name, and in being transmitted to us these letters have only reached their real address." Let us find what truth there is in this opinion. It is important to know, if only so as not to be deceived.

In Madame de Sévigné's correspondence there are distinctions to be observed. She does not write in the same way to all her friends, because she has not the same confidence in them all. She is quite aware that some of them do not keep for themselves alone the letters they receive. From Bussy, for instance, anything may be expected. Did he not one day take the liberty to let the king himself into the secret of their intimacy, by sending him his cousin's letters as well as his own? It is natural, then, that in writing to Bussy she should sometimes be constrained. Can she tell what will become of what she sends him in confidence? What Bussy often did for his own sake, Coulanges sometimes did for the sake of Madame de Sévigné; the admiration he felt for her wit was so great that he could not keep it to himself. This she suspected, and so is tempted, in writing to him, to be a little dressy, that the inquisitive may not surprise her unadorned. It ought to occasion no surprise, then, if there is in the first case some constraint, and in the second something perhaps a little studied; but if there is, it does not last long, for it is not a part of her temperament long to retain her self-command. Soon her fancy regains control and hurries her away; she forgets the precautions she wished to take,

she surrenders unconditionally ; and she does well, for she is never more charming.

In any case, if the thought of this uncertain and unknown public may have exercised some slight influence over her when she wrote to Coulanges and Bussy, in her correspondence with her daughter, at least, she had nothing at all to fear. Here we have the closest intimacy. All that is in the heart is freely uttered. What it would have been dangerous to repeat is related with perfect confidence. Private affairs and affairs of state, the neighborhood gossip, the most scandalous stories, the most compromising revelations,—all are communicated. Madame de Grignan did not, therefore, let her mother's letters get abroad ; and if, perchance, she read an extract announcing an important bit of news, she tells us that she took great care that no one should be able to peep over her shoulder and read what ought not to be read. Madame de Sévigné, then, felt sure that the public would never know what she said, and wrote without anxiety. She did not take pains to reflect, to be on her guard, to elaborate a style, "which to her is but a tragic buskin." She abandoned herself to the stream of her thoughts and feelings : "Do you know what I am going to do? Just what I have done hitherto. I always begin without

knowing what the end will be; and, ignorant whether my letter will be long or short, I write as much as my pen chooses; it has full sway." And again: "First, my love to M. de Grignan; I greatly wonder at him, and at you too, my daughter, for being so fond of my letters. I am always astonished at the kind things you say of them; they pass so quickly from me that I never perceive their merits, nor their shortcomings either." She must surely have written very rapidly to have written so much. With all the demands of society upon her, if she had aspired to make her letters eloquent performances she never would have found time to write so many; at all events, she would have made them shorter. Nothing savors more of improvisation than that wealth of details, that fulness and abundance of recital, which are her most delightful qualities, though she sometimes reproached herself with them as faults. When she thought of the weary task her daughter would have in reading "all this gossip," she was vexed with herself, asked her daughter's pardon, and promised faithfully to be henceforth more abstemious. But when once she began chatting with her daughter, all these good resolutions were forgotten, and she knew not where to stop. "I prose away," she said, "with an ease that is fatal to you."

II.

HERE, then, is a young, lively, volatile woman, going much into society and much absorbed in pleasure, who has never had the least idea of composing literary works; and yet, as soon as she puts pen to paper, in letters addressed to but one person, without a thought of the public or of posing before it, she writes with the confidence and exactitude of a professional author; she knows how to express her thoughts and feelings; she finds the fitting word; she avoids the hesitation, the repetition, the obscurity, from which those who make a business of writing escape with such difficulty; in short, without seeking it, almost without knowing it, from the very first she is perfect. How has this happened; and by what miracle has she so soon acquired what demands of others so much study and so many efforts?

The answer first occurring to the mind is; that she had received special gifts from Heaven, and that it was her nature to write well; but Nature needs aid from labor. We do not find that those who are born artists know music before they learn it, nor that they play well on an instrument the first time they touch it. In every art there is something in the knack,

which must first be learned, and the art of writing is no exception; on the contrary, there is hardly a more difficult one. "It is no small matter," says Cousin, precisely in respect of Madame de Sévigné, "to express one's sentiments and ideas in a natural order, in their true perspective, in terms neither too studied nor too vulgar, neither exaggerating nor enfeebling the thought." These delicate qualities presuppose some study and some practice. I do not think there ever was a writer who became such without a certain apprenticeship; and if it seems to us that some men of genius needed no training, this is because we do not perceive in what way they were trained. We are too prone to fancy that the only education which can train the mind is that given in the schools according to ordinary methods; in reality, there are a thousand means of education far different one from another. Some need a teacher, others are self-taught. Some require solitude, shutting themselves up in their studies, living among their reflections and their books; others, on the contrary, never retire to meditate, and seem quite to abandon themselves to the whirl of social enjoyment, while, without appearing to reflect, they lose nothing of what they see and hear. All things serve as lessons to those who know how to

profit by them. We can learn from the skilful and from the awkward, from the literate and from the illiterate, by working and by doing nothing; and as there are many ways of learning that escape our notice, it always seems rash to assert that any one knows a thing without having learned it.

In any case, we may be sure that Madame de Sévigné had learned how to write; and it is interesting to know how she received her training.

In the first place, she had as teachers in her youth two of the most learned men of that epoch, Chapelain and Ménage. Chapelain must have been the first to give her lessons. We know that he was attached to the Coulanges family, and it is natural that he should have been called upon to perfect the education of Mademoiselle de Chantal, while he had charge of that of her cousin M. de La Trousse. Chapelain's reputation is against him, and he never recovered from the attacks of Boileau. For that matter, he criticised himself with much severity. While those around him were unanimous in sounding the praises of his unfinished epic, which was expected to be the glory of France, he spoke of it to his friends with humility. "As to my 'Maid of Orleans,'" he wrote to Chief-Justice Maynard, "so coarse

and countrified is she yet, that there is risk of her not leaving my study till I do, and that toward twilight, that her defects may be less apparent. I am waiting with great impatience till our good fortune may bring you to this court, in order to beg you that she may receive a little combing down at your hands."

Again, he says to Balzac: "Believe me, sir, I am of small importance, and what I am composing of still less. The public, perforce, and contrary to my intention, wishes to regard me as a great poet; and, even if I were not quite the opposite, I should still prefer not to be looked at from that point of view. I have, it seems to me, earned a title to something better, something more rightfully my own." This reminds one of Boileau's saying: "Why does he not write in prose?" Alas! still worse might have been said; for while Chapelain is a bad poet, it cannot be claimed that he is a good prose writer. The two volumes of his letters just given to the public are frightfully dull. His pleasantries, especially, are like the gambols of a hippopotamus. One day when he wished to write a gallant letter to Madame de Grignan with regard to a visit she was about making to the fountain at Vaucluse, he said to her: "Though I am not such a tender rimer as Petrarch, I am still a rimer

as well as he, and our common vocation might give me access to him in order to induce him to perform part of the duty he owes to a person of your rank. As for his mistress, I should not despair of making her understand that she would run no risk by giving you a hearty welcome, and that the attachment you have to the Count de Grignan would not allow you to display all your charms at Vaucluse, to entice her lover away from her." This is not precisely the style of Madame de Sévigné; it is evident that Chapelain did not teach her the art of writing! But he had a good knowledge of Latin, Italian, and Spanish, and did her a great service by teaching her to read Vergil "in the majesty of his text," to understand the "*Jerusalem Delivered*" and the "*Orlando Furioso*." One day when she had consulted him about some slight mannerisms in Tasso, he replied that "love of frippery and point induced him to adopt squinting and obscure modes of expression, but that for a stagger we do not cut a courser's hamstrings." The remark is a just one; but what a wretched style! Chapelain was very proud of his pupil, and his pupil was on the whole very grateful to her teacher; but gratitude could not prevent the bright young girl from perceiving what was ridiculous in the professor.

When she saw him coming in with his vulgar look and shabby attire, I fancy that the thought of "Chapelain Dishevelled"¹ sometimes flitted across her mind, and that she could not forbear a smile. So she calls him Goodman Chapelain, or Old Chapelain. His pompous, pedantic airs did not escape her notice. When announcing to her daughter that he had been smitten with apoplexy and rendered speechless, she said: "He confesses to the priest by squeezing his hand, and sits in his chair like a statue. Thus God confounds the pride of philosophers!" It must be confessed that this is but a slender eulogy for the dying man.

I suppose Madame de Sévigné was more indebted to Ménage, and more attached to him. He was much younger than Chapelain, besides being more a man of the world. We have seen that he courted his pupil, and that she scarcely resented it. As none of the copies of verses he addressed to her bears her maiden name, it may be believed that he did not know her intimately until after her marriage. Her regular education was already finished, and she had only to perfect it with Ménage. It is probable that she was very

¹ "Chapelain Décoiffé" ("Chapelain Bereft of his Wig"), a witty burlesque by Boileau. — TR.

glad to be acquainted with a man who enjoyed great renown, and whose name Balzac and Salmasius mentioned only with respect. Ménage, to be sure, is not a Scaliger, nor even a Casaubon; his learning is neither so deep nor so sound as that of the great scholars of the preceding century. He himself acknowledged (at least the saying is attributed to him in the "Menagiana") that he did not understand Pindar well enough to enjoy it, and that he never read any Greek author without a translation. His Latin, though so clear and elegant, is not always correct, and his adversaries have pointed out some quite gross blunders. Nevertheless, he was a learned man whose knowledge had a wide range. He published poems in French, Latin, Greek, and Italian. To be sure, they are often sad stuff, and he himself acknowledged this frankly enough, though he did not like to be told of it. Yet among them are some written in rather an easy style, especially those in Latin; and then, too, it is a rare accomplishment to make verses in four languages. Unhappily, Ménage's pretensions were even greater than his deserts. He inhabited two different worlds,—that of fashion and that of learning,—and wished to please them both. These two kinds of ambition are inconsistent. He who

would be too agreeable both to the learned and to the fashionable, runs the risk of displeasing both classes; scholars tax him with levity, and worldlings vote him heavy. Thus it happened that toward the last the reputation of Ménage declined. As his vanity did not quite blind him, he was so unfortunate as to perceive this, and said sadly to his friends, "I have gone out of fashion." Some vexatious disputes that he was imprudent enough to bring on turned the laugh against him. Spite of all his efforts to appear the child of his age, he had remained in many respects a scholar of the sixteenth century. Like Scaliger and Justus Lipsius, he had a quarrelsome disposition, and was wont to heap abuse upon those who ventured to differ with him. He raised noisy disputes for causes that seem trivial to those unfamiliar with the points in question; he launched thick volumes against Baillet, d'Aubignac, and Bouhours; he abused Cotin, who responded by a dull pamphlet entitled the "Ménagerie." This quarrel was disastrous to both; for Molière, thinking it comic, took occasion to render it immortal. Who does not know the famous scene of Trissotin and Vadius in "The Learned Women"? Trissotin is Cotin, there can be no mistake. Vadius is not so clearly marked. Ménage

showed his good sense by not recognizing his likeness, but the public was not deceived. Madame de Sévigné needed, however, no Molière to make her perceive the ridiculous side of her teacher; she perceived it unaided. The pedantic disputes in which he revelled appeared to her very foolish. Referring to the ridiculous wrangle between him and Father Bouhours, this cruel sally escaped her: "They tell one another the truth, and often this truth is an insult." "Behold," says M. Mesnard very justly, "what Ménage gained by teaching her to read Tacitus: 'Flagitia invicem objectavere, neuter falso.'"¹

Though she could not help occasionally making a little fun of Chapelain and Ménage, she acknowledged fully what she owed them. More than once she spoke with gratitude of "the good teachers she had in her youth." These good teachers taught her French in two ways,—first by making her acquainted with Latin, Italian, Spanish, since there is nothing better than these comparisons with foreign tongues to make us masters of our own; and, moreover, they taught her French directly by the manner in which each of them studied and used it. Both were eminent grammarians, and

¹ "By turns they flung the taunt of shameful deeds, and neither falsely."

took an important part in the work then going forward of cleansing the French idiom, of making it purer, more precise, more regular, in order to prepare it for the great literary epoch then beginning. This work may be said to have gone on around Madame de Sévigné; she was familiarly acquainted with almost all of those in charge of it; they were her friends and her teachers. As even the world of rank and fashion had acquired a taste for these researches, she could hear the pupils of Vaugelas, in the society she frequented, discussing the meaning and standing of various expressions, condemning those they considered ill-constructed, and giving others their final form. The women were not merely witnesses of these debates, but were sometimes appealed to as judges. The gallant Father Bouhours thought a great deal of their support, and, hoping to array them on his side, loaded them with eulogy: "There is nothing more correct, more proper, more natural than the language of most Frenchwomen. The words they use, however common, seem quite new, and made on purpose for what they say; so that if Nature herself wished to speak, I believe she would borrow their tongue." Perhaps when you reflect that women were present at these learned discussions and took part in them, you

will be tempted at first to feel some anxiety about the effect on themselves, especially if you remember Philaminte, Armande, and Bélide,¹ so tiresome, so pedantic, so infatuated with grammar,—

“Grammar, whose sovereign law all men obey,
And who o'er monarchs can enforce her sway.”

But Philaminte and Bélide are foolish women who would have made as bad a use of anything else as they did of learning and grammar. Their example does not prove that intelligent and sensible women may not derive great profit from these studies. When the investigation of the origin of words, of the changes they have undergone, and the determination of their true meaning, goes on in their presence, they retain some traces of it; and without special study, simply by listening to what is said, they gain the habit of making use of the right word in the right place. Above all, let it not be thought that this surrounding influence of grammar can embarrass those subjected to it, as has been asserted, and impair their freedom of expression by giving them too much concern about purity. I think, on the contrary, that, far from enslaving them, it

¹ Names of leading characters in Molière's “Learned Women,” from which comes also the ensuing quotation.—TR.

delivers them from that most painful of servitudes, — bondage to the letter. What women are most lacking in, even when they write well, is originality of expression. As they have in general not received the more thorough education open to men, they know words only by their daily use; accordingly, they venture to employ them only in the way that people ordinarily use them. On the other hand, he who knows the origin of his words, and who is consequently not restricted to their ordinary acceptation, can employ them with more freedom, since he perceives just how far he may turn them from their usual meaning and place them in a new setting. Then it may be said that he is their master and that they obey him; or rather he need no more trouble his head about them, for they present themselves without his seeking, and stand ready to express his thought in all the variety of its shades and in the fulness of its meaning. If the lessons of Ménage and Chapelain could render to Madame de Sévigné such service as this, she had good reason to be grateful to them.

To this education received from her teachers must be added what she derived from her reading. At all times she was “a great devourer of books.” Everything interested her. She was very fond of romances, as we have

seen, but more serious works did not affright her. Her especial delight was in history, even that of the Turks, in which she found pashas with many Christian virtues. Her inquiring mind found pleasure in everything, from Vergil to Father Maimbourg, spite of the latter's villainous style; and from Nicole who made her quake with fear, to Rabelais who made her die of laughter. It was especially during her leisure intervals at the Rochers estate that she resorted to all kinds of reading to fill up the day: "We still have perfect weather; we read a great deal, and I find what pleasure there is in having no memory, for Corneille's plays and the works of Despréaux, Sarazin, Voiture, all pass again in review before me without wearying me,—quite the reverse. We sometimes dip into Plutarch's 'Morals,' which are admirable, or into Arnauld's 'Prejudices' or the replies of the ministers, or skim the Koran a little if the fancy takes us; in short, there is no region we do not explore." But when so many regions are explored all at once, none can be thoroughly known. Of this, Madame de Sévigné was well aware; she never posed as a scholar. Speaking of Madame de Ker man, her neighbor in Brittany, who resembled her in being a great reader, she said: "She knows a little of everything, and as I have a

like smattering, our superficial areas very well correspond." Perhaps, after all, it is better that a woman should thus range through all authors, from the "Cleopatra" to the Koran, rather than have too profound a knowledge of but one. As a result she may be superficial, but at least she will not be pedantic.

As Madame de Sévigné was always pleased with the education she had received or acquired, she also desired passionately that her grandchildren should receive a similar training. She wanted them early taken in hand, and wished nothing to be neglected in the way of mental culture. "It is presuming too much," said she, "to expect everything from natural gifts unaided." When the young Marquis de Grignan returned from Philipsburg with the scratch that made her so proud of him, she tried to persuade him to improve his leisure time by reading some good books; but he was too busy going into society, and dancing with the Misses Castelnau, to listen to his grandmother's advice. "His young blood makes such a din," said she, "that he does not hear." She had better success with her grand-daughter. Nothing is more touching than the pains she took in order that this girl might be well trained. She watched over her from afar; and as soon as any little differ-

ence arose between mother and daughter, she hastened to interpose. "So Pauline is not perfect; so much the better. You will enjoy making her over." She tried especially to prevent Madame de Grignan from sending her daughter, in a moment of anger, back to the nuns of Aubenas, with whom the girl had been kept for several years. "Do not believe," said the grandmother, "that a convent can mend her education, either with regard to religion, of which the good sisters know little, or in other matters." The mother will understand much better how to correct the little outbursts of her distrustful temper, but it must be done with gentleness. "Guide her gently; her desire to please you will do more than scolding; try to talk reasonably to her without scolding or humiliating her, for that rouses opposition; and—my word for it—you will work a little miracle." Her delight was great when she learned that Pauline was very fond of reading. "What a pleasant, what a fortunate trait! She is beyond the reach of tedium and idleness,—two horrid pests." Then she desires them not to give her a distaste for reading by drawing the reins too tight, and is afraid they restrict her in the choice of books. "I prefer her to devour bad books rather than not like to read." She is vexed with the scruples of a

foolish confessor, who is not willing to sanction the reading of theatrical pieces. "I don't think you have the heart to obey Father Lanterne. Would you not allow Pauline, who has so much intelligence, the pleasure of making some use of it by reading the fine plays of Corneille,—'Polyeucte,' 'Cinna,' and the rest? To have no trace of piety except this restriction, without being led to it by the grace of God, seems like nakedness in shoes." As to novels, there was a difference of opinion. "Instances occur," she said to her daughter, "both of good and of bad effects from this kind of reading. You dislike them, and have got on admirably; I was fond of them, and might have turned out worse. All is wholesome to the healthy, as you say. Wishing to defend my taste, I used to say that a young man would become generous and brave by contemplating my heroes, and that a young girl would become virtuous and discreet by reading 'Cleopatra.' Once in a while there is one who takes things just the wrong way; but such an one would perhaps turn out no better if he did not know how to read. When the mind is well balanced, it is not easily spoiled." There are works, however, which she prefers to novels. Above all, she desired Pauline to acquire a taste for historical works. "If her

nose has to be pinched to make her swallow them, I pity her." Then come authors still more serious: "Has she tried Lucian? Is she equal to some of the 'Minor Epistles'? . . . Regarding ethical works, as she would not make so good a use of them as you, I should not wish her to put her little nose either into Montaigne, or Charron, or any of that kind; it is too early yet. The best ethics for her years is that taught in good conversation, in fables, in histories, by examples; and this, I think, is enough."

This reading she recommends to her granddaughter is the same she herself pursued, in her youth, with so much profit. She speaks of it with all the effusiveness of gratitude; she is conscious of all she owes to it. By reading, one becomes accustomed to reflect; by reading, one learns to write; "and it is such a delightful accomplishment to know how to write what you think!"

III.

OUR education is not the work of our teachers alone; it is carried on also by the society we frequent and the people with whom we are connected. No one escapes altogether the

influence of social environment; and Madame de Sévigné must have felt it more than others. We shall see with what ease she adopted in her maturity the opinions of those about her, and how quickly she was affected by their sentiments. This characteristic must have been still more marked in her youth, at an age when all have fewer settled ideas of their own, and are more accessible to the ideas of others.

At first, as we know, she belonged to the Rambouillet coterie, and her place among them was so well assured that Somaize has put her portrait in his “Dictionary of *Précieuses*.¹” No one could pass through such a society with impunity; and so some stern critics, convinced that she must have been injured by it, have sought to find traces of affectation in her correspondence. If there are any such traces they are certainly not numerous. The Madame de Sévigné that we know must have appropriated the good qualities of the coterie rather than its bad ones. It was easy enough for her to avoid its defects. By her hearty temperament, her sturdy good sense, the plain-

¹ The *précieuses* were French ladies who aimed to encourage a higher standard of purity and taste, both in manners and in speech, than that prevalent in the France of their time,—about the middle of the seventeenth century.—TR.

ness and candor of her mind, and by her relish for extremely free language and merry talk, she was the opposite of a *précieuse*. Let us not forget, moreover, that she was only nineteen when Julie d'Angennes, the daughter of Madame de Rambouillet, married M. de Montausier, and that from this time on the coterie began to scatter. Madame de Sévigné could have known it only in its decline, when its importance was already much diminished. This, then, was not the place where she completed her intellectual training.

Probably she owed more to the circles which gathered up what was left of the Rambouillet society, and which endeavored to keep up its traditions. She was very much appreciated in these circles; and as early as 1661 one of her admirers speaks of the "high and just renown that her merit gives her in society." These circles, we know, were much occupied with literature; their members liked to talk of recent poems and of new books; authors greatly desired to please them, and made sacrifices to deserve their applause. They accordingly had some influence on the literature of the period; and if we wish to know the special trend of this influence, the theatre, faithful mirror of society, will show us. It is the period of the transition from Corneille to Racine. People were

gradually losing their taste for the ideal heroism and magnanimity in fashion since "The Cid;" and instead of those inequalities of style, those haughty colloquialisms, those coarse touches which were not displeasing to less polished spectators, they required more delicacy of portraiture, colors better blended, more scrupulous correctness, sustained nobility, dignity, elegance. Moreover, the idiom is no longer quite the same. Were I not reluctant to establish too abrupt divisions in what took place gradually and by insensible transitions, I should say that a very different kind of French then succeeded the 'French of Descartes and Balzac. Their language seems the work of scholars, is formed on the model of Latin oratory, and has as its special characteristics, copiousness and majesty. The later French, written and spoken in the second half of the century, continually progressing in refinement and grace from Pascal to La Bruyère, and ever becoming nimbler, more animated, and more buoyant,—the language with which the next century armed itself for its battles,—seems rather to have been formed and fashioned in the conversations of men and women of the world. The literary men of this epoch recognize the drawing-room even more as their school of instruction than as their means of diversion. Voiture appears

to be only a sort of secretary to the witty people who admit him to their society. "You see," he says, "how well I know how to make use of the fine sayings I hear." Ménage relates that M. de Varillas said to him one day that of ten things he knew, he had learned nine in conversation; "and I," adds Ménage, "could say about the same thing."

These are not merely polite phrases. I think it could be proved by examples that Voiture and Ménage told the truth, and that society was very instructive to its votaries. As the century grows older, people possessed of no other education than that derived from good company become more exacting, more fastidious in their mode of expression, and gain more and more the habit of writing well. If we go back to the period of Louis XIII. and of the Fronde, we find that the great ladies of that time, Madame de Hautefort, Madame de Longueville, Madame de Maure, Madame de Sablé, had certainly very exalted sentiments and very elegant manners; it is likely that they talked well, but it is certain that they wrote ill. Their sentences are heavy, lumbering, parenthetical, full of vulgar phrases and trite expressions. To read their letters through requires a devotion that is blind to their shortcomings. Madame de Longueville, writing to

inform Madame de Sablé of the death of her confessor, M. Singlin, the famous spiritual director of the Port Royal nuns, thus concludes her letter: "In truth I am quite touched by it; for besides the obligation I felt to this holy man for his charity towards me, behold me again plunged into the same perplexity as before getting him,—that is, being in need of some one and not knowing whom to get. I pray you to pray earnestly to God for me. I do not doubt that you are touched by it too, and that besides, the touch of friendship and of need, you are also touched by seeing death in one of your friends, which is as it were to see it in one's self." Twenty years later, people no longer wrote thus. I will not, in order to prove my point, contrast with this crude note the letters of Madame de Sévigné. Success thus gained would be too cheap; besides, it might be urged that she was a woman of exceptional genius, that her talent belonged to her alone, and that her example gives us no assurance as to others. Rather let us select from among her correspondents second-rate persons of but slight reputation, who will represent better the common standard.

There was a provincial lady, a young Breton girl, so timid and embarrassed that Madame de Sévigné had not at first expected much of her,

though she became the wife of Charles de Sévigné. We have some of her letters, not masterpieces like those of her mother-in-law, but still correct in expression and easy in manner. Writing to her sister-in-law, Madame de Grignan, she alludes pleasantly to jests that had been made concerning her short stature and puny appearance. "I wish to beg your son," she says, "no longer to call me aunt; I am so small and so delicate that I am only his cousin, at most. Madame de Sévigné's constitution is not at all like mine; she is tall and strong, and I take such care of her as would make you jealous. I confess to you, however, that this care involves no constraint; I let her walk in the woods alone with her books; she plunges into them as naturally as the weasel into the jaws of the toad. . . . I am enraptured, my dear sister, to hear from you that Madame de Sévigné loves me; I have good taste enough to know the value of her affection, and to return her love with all my heart." Madame de Sévigné rightly thought what her daughter-in-law wrote "very good," for it is written in easy and fluent language which expresses well the meaning. At another time she happened to insert in one of her letters some words of her grandson, the Marquis de Grignan, who had just returned from his first

campaign. She is in the act of sending her daughter, as usual, the news of the city and court, when she breaks off with: "Why, here is the Marquis returning from court! I had begun to sing,—

'Will the hero I'm waiting for never return?'

but here he is now with my pen, which I surrender to him." And it must be acknowledged that the young officer of sixteen makes no awkward use of this formidable pen. Note how he relates to his mother what he has done: "I come from Versailles, Madame, where I went last Sunday. First I called at the house of the Marshal de Lorges to ask him to present me to the king; this he promised to do, and made an appointment with me at the door of Madame de Maintenon's rooms, that I might salute the king as he came out. So I saluted him; whereupon he stopped and gave me a nod and a smile. The next day I paid my respects to his Highness the Dauphin, my Lady the Dauphiness, my Lord the king's brother, my Lady his wife, and the princes of the blood, at their apartments, and was everywhere well received. I then went to the house of M. de Montausier and remained there until the play. They acted 'Andromaque,' a piece to me altogether new. Imagine, Madame, how

much I enjoyed it." He goes on relating his happy fortunes in this lively manner, and ends with: "This, Madame, is an exact account of what took place at Versailles. Permit me, as I look at your portrait, to sigh that I cannot throw myself at the feet of the original, kiss both her hands, and aspire to one of her cheeks." It is easy to see that this young Marquis has just been hearing the fashionable wits. Since his return from the army he has been constantly in good society, and repeats to his mother the gallantries there uttered. His letter is none the less easy and agreeable; and bears little resemblance to what persons like him wrote some twenty years earlier. This is not because he has studied much. We know, on the contrary, that his education had been at the outset very much neglected, beginning late and ending so early that at fifteen he was a soldier, and off for Germany with the army of his Highness the Dauphin. His grandmother would have had him make up his deficiencies during his leisure hours; but we have just seen that she could not give him a taste for literature. Fortunately he loved society, and commerce with it was enough to give him a certain politeness of manner and ease of style of which his letter bears the trace.

How much did Madame de Sévigné owe to this society in which she passed her life? This is hard to determine exactly, but we may be sure that she was indebted to it for something.

IV.

WE have seen that Madame de Sévigné was prepared to write well by her excellent education, by her reading, and by association with the most distinguished persons in Paris and at the court. She knew her mother-tongue, and spoke it wonderfully well. In that society where intelligent women were met with at every step, she passed for one of the most intelligent and cultivated ; her repartees were quoted, her decisions appealed to as authority. At the same time she had the good fortune to witness the blooming of a great literature. In her youth, she read the " Provincial Letters " when first they were furtively circulated ; later on, she witnessed the birth of Molière's first comedies, Racine's first tragedies, La Fontaine's first fables ; she heard Mascalon, Bossuet, and Bourdaloue ; she chatted familiarly with Retz and La Rochefoucauld. With her great intelligence, and her keen delight in all the beauties of literary works, though retaining a secret

preference for what she admired in youth, she does not refuse to enjoy the more recent masterpieces; she understands all, profits by all, assimilates all. When the time comes for her soul to be tried and stirred to its depths, all these gathered treasures will be clearly seen. We may be sure that she will know how to express her thoughts and feelings.

Such a time for her was the occasion of her daughter's departure. To be sure, she had before this shown herself a clever woman who knew how to write very agreeable letters, and how to acquit herself in affairs of delicacy with great skill. She had even approached eloquence when she had to defend herself against the cunning and impertinence of Bussy. But all this was comparatively nothing; to bring out her real strength she must be touched in her inmost affections. Her passion then breaks forth from her heart, and it may be said that her whole talent flows out with her tears.

Her daughter has left her, and has gone to join her husband at the world's end, away in Provence. Before reaching this distant land, from which she will return only at rare intervals, she must be exposed to dangers which then used to make the bravest tremble,— the declivity of Tarare, the Rhone,

the Bridge of St. Esprit, and what not. The mother thinks of all and dreads all long beforehand. She has continually before her eyes quagmires, precipices, horses running away, boats sinking. Returning to her empty house, where all reminds her of the departed one, she takes her pen and relieves her full heart by writing: "My grief would indeed be commonplace if I could portray it to you, so I shall not undertake it. It is vain for me to seek the dear daughter whom I no longer find, and every step of her horses takes her farther from me. I went to Ste. Marie ceaselessly weeping, and dying with grief; it seemed as if my heart and soul were torn from me; and, in truth, what a cruel parting! I asked the privilege of being left alone; they took me to Madame du Housset's room and made a fire for me; Agnes looked at me without speaking,—this being our bargain; I stayed there till five o'clock, sobbing continually. Every thought stabbed me with grief." Three days later her daughter's first letters are brought to her, and her grief is renewed: "As you received my ring with a burst of tears, so I receive your letters; it seems as if my heart would break. . . . You make me feel for you all that love can feel; but if you think of me, my poor darling, be sure my thoughts are

continually with you ; it is what pious people call constant devotion ; it is what we ought to feel for God, if we did our duty. Nothing distracts me from it ; I am always with you. I see that coach always advancing but never approaching. I am always on the high-road, and sometimes feel almost afraid lest the coach upset. The rains that have continued for the last three days drive me to despair. The Rhone causes me strange apprehensions. I have a map before my eyes, and know every place where you stop over night. To-night you are at Nevers, and Sunday you will be at Lyons, where you will get this letter." Then come no end of cautions with regard to all the risks that may be run in travelling : " Have pity on me, and take care of yourself if you desire me to live. You have so thoroughly convinced me of your love that it would seem as if, merely to please me, you would not be rash. Do write me about your trip by boat. Alas ! how dear and precious to me is that little boat which the Rhone hurries so cruelly from me ! " Days pass, but grief remains. After the daughter has been gone a fortnight, it seems to the mother that it must be an age : " Ah ! my dear, how I long just to see you, to hear you, to embrace you, merely to see you pass by, if the rest is

too much to ask!" The receipt of letters, the coming of friends and acquaintances to pay her their compliments, the places she has seen with her daughter and sees again alone, all keep her tears flowing. "I mean to live in solitude," she says when she first returns to Livry, "and am making of this a little nunnery, that here I may pray to God, here yield to a thousand reflections. But, my poor darling, I shall not succeed so well in all this as in thinking of you. I have not once ceased doing so since my coming; and, unable to keep back all my thoughts of you, I have begun to write to you, seated at the end of that little shady walk you love, on the mossy seat where I have seen you lying. But, Heavens! where have I not seen you here? And how all these thoughts pierce my heart! I see you; you are present to me; I think and think again of it all. My head and my wits are in a whirl; but in vain I turn about, in vain I search; the dear child I love so passionately is two hundred leagues away. I possess her no more. At this my tears flow, and I cannot keep them back."

But stop: we must be reasonable. When once we begin quoting Madame de Sévigné we should be glad to keep on. Nothing is more difficult than to break the charm these

letters have over one, and regain self-command to study and criticise them. Yet this must be done if we wish to account for our pleasure, and by analysis increase it.

The passages just cited appear so simple, and utter so naturally what we all experience, that they are read the first time without surprise. There seems nothing remarkable about them except this very simplicity and naturalness. Now, these are not the qualities which attract attention. It is difficult to appreciate them in works where they occur, and it is only by reading works where they are lacking that we realize all their importance. But here, as soon as we reflect, we are astonished to perceive that this great emotion is expressed in language strong, confident, and correct, with no hesitation and no bungling. The lively sequence of these complaints implies that they were poured forth all at once, in a single outburst; and yet the perfection of the style seems impossible of attainment without some study and some retouching. It is sometimes said that a strong passion at once creates the language to express it. I greatly doubt this. On the contrary, it seems to me that when the soul is violently agitated, the words by which we try to express our feelings always appear dull and cold; we are tempted to

make use of exaggerated and far-fetched expressions in order to rise to the level of our sorrow or joy. Hence come sometimes excessive terms, discordant metaphors. We might be inclined to regard these as thought out at leisure and in cold blood, while on the contrary they are the product of the first impulse, of the effort we instinctively make to find an expression corresponding to the intensity of our passion. There is nothing of this kind in Madame de Sévigné's letters, and however violent her grief may be, it always speaks in accurate and fitting language. This is a valuable quality, and one extremely rare. That we may not be surprised at finding it so highly developed in her, we need only remember what has just been said of the way in which she was unconsciously prepared to become a great writer.

Another characteristic of Madame de Sévigné's letters, not less remarkable, is that generally her most loving messages are cleverly expressed. I do not refer merely to certain isolated phrases that have sometimes appeared rather affected. "The north wind bound for Grignan makes me ache for your chest." "My dear, how the burden within you weighs me down!" "I dare not read your letters for fear of having read them." These are only occa-

sional flashes; but almost always, when on the point of giving way to all her emotion, she gives her phrase an ingenious turn, she makes witty observations, is bright, pleasing, elegant. All this seems to some to proceed from a mind quite self-possessed, and not so far affected by passion as to be inattentive to elegant diction. Just now I placed naturalness among Madame de Sévigné's leading qualities. There are those who are not of this opinion, and contend that naturalness is just the merit she most lacks; but we must define our meaning. Naturalness for each one is what is conformable to his nature; and as each one of us has a nature of his own very different from that of his neighbors, naturalness cannot be exactly the same in every instance. Moreover, education and habit give us each a second nature which often has more control over us than the original one. In the society in which Madame de Sévigné lived, people made a point of speaking wittily. The first few times one appeared in this society it required a little study and effort to assume the same tone as the rest. One had to be on the watch for those pleasant repartees that, among the frequenters of the Rambouillet and Richelieu houses, gave the new-comer a good reputation; but after a while these happy sayings came unsought.

To persons trained in such a school, what might at first sight appear subtle and refined is ordinary and natural. Whether they speak or write, their ideas take a certain form which is not the usual one; and bright, witty, and dainty phrases which would require labor of others occur to them spontaneously. To be sure, I do not mean that Madame de Sévigné wrote well without knowing it. This is a thing of which a witty woman always has an inkling; and besides, her friends did not permit her to be ignorant of it. "Your letters are delightful," they told her, "and you are like your letters." It was all the easier to believe this, because she paid to herself in a whisper such compliments as others addressed to her aloud. One day, when she had recently written to her friend Dr. Bourdelot, she said to her daughter: "Bravo! what a good answer I sent him! That is a foolish thing to say, but I had a good, wide-awake pen that day." It is very delightful to feel that one has wit, and we can understand how Madame de Sévigné might sometimes have yielded to this feeling with some satisfaction. In her most private correspondence, that in which she least thought of the public, we might note certain passages in which she takes pleasure in elaborating and decorating her thought, and in adding to it

new details more and more dainty and ingenious. This she does without effort, to satisfy her own taste, and to give herself the pleasure of expressing her thought agreeably. It has been remarked that good talkers are not sensitive to the praises of others only; they also wish to please themselves independently of the public around them, and like to hear themselves talk. It might be said in the same sense that Madame de Sévigné sometimes likes to see herself write. This is one of those pretty artifices which in women do not exclude sincerity, and which may be united with naturalness.

Doubtless so fitting and exact a mode of speech, such refinement and wit in the expression of matters of affection, are rare qualities; but they are not the distinguishing characteristics of Madame de Sévigné. She was not the only one who possessed them; we find them, for example, in the correspondence of her friend Madame de Coulanges. What belongs to Madame de Sévigné alone, and places her in the first rank, is her imagination. No one has had a more lively and versatile imagination than hers. She possesses to a wonderful degree that charming gift of seeing what is far away, of travelling in fancy. Need it be said that her daughter's

country-seat in Provence was the usual goal of these airy flights? In her moments of bitter sorrow, the thought of that winged horse which in two days travelled the world over, occurred to her mind; and she said, "Oh, if I had the hippogriff at my command!" She really has no need of it; her imagination answers the purpose. From the very first parting she was so well acquainted with the town of Grignan, which she had never seen, that when the daughter leaves it the mother finds herself all abroad. "I believe you to be at Lambesc, my darling, but I cannot see you well from here; there are clouds in my imagination which hide you from my sight. I had become quite at home in Grignan Castle; I saw your rooms, I walked on your terrace, I went to mass in your beautiful church; but now I know not where I am." Another time, after having asked for tidings of the Chevalier de Grignan, whom she highly esteemed, and whose infirmities kept him in Provence, she added: "Tell me in what room you have put him, that I may make him visits." As yet she only knew her granddaughter Pauline by the pleasing descriptions that were sent of her charming countenance, and especially of her beautiful eyes. At these her imagination is kindled, and she

cries: "Oh, how pretty they are! I see them." This is not mere talk; she really saw them. To her absent friends she chats as if they were beside her. Her letters are conversations. She herself says so, and they have all the charms of conversation. And first, we find in them a charming variety and disorder resembling that of familiar talk. She is not like her cousin Bussy, who marshals his thoughts with exemplary regularity. He makes a point of replying to all the observations and even to all the witticisms addressed to him, in perfect order; each is in its place and waits its turn. Madame de Sévigné has no methodical way of writing, and lays no plan beforehand. Her fancy is her guide. She goes out in every direction, and at last tells so many strange things of which at first she did not think, that she becomes a little ashamed of it: "If the postmen knew with what our letters are filled, they would leave them midway." As she sees the events she recounts, no matter at what distance they have taken place, the pictures she gives of them are incredibly true to life. I am a little embarrassed about citing proof, not because instances are wanting, but because these charming narratives are too well known,—they are known by heart. How

could I venture to repeat, at this late day, either the death of Turenne, or the story of the Archbishop of Reims returning from St. Germain, or how the game of basset brought about the separation of M. de La Fare and Madame de La Sablière, or the charming gossip about Langlée and Madame de Montespan's dress? But here in a few strokes is a finished picture which seems to me less familiar. It represents the great Condé, who was usually very negligent in his attire, as he appeared to the astonished courtiers on the day when the Prince of Conti married Mademoiselle de Blois: "I will tell you the greatest and strangest piece of news that you could be informed of; namely, that my Lord the Prince of Condé was shaved yesterday; his beard is gone; this is no illusion, nor is it said in jest; it is the truth. All the court beheld it, and Madame de Langeron, seizing her time when the lion had his paws crossed, dressed him in a close-fitting coat decorated with diamonds; and his valet, also taking advantage of his patience, frizzed and powdered his hair, thus reducing him to be the handsomest man of the court, with a head of hair better than any wig. This was the miracle of the wedding feast."

With an imagination so lively and a nature

so versatile, it was natural to receive without resistance the impressions that others wished to give her. She adopted the views of her friends, and was quick to share their sentiments. "I always have the same opinion as the person I last listened to." It is evident that she understood her own character. Sometimes she even jested about this weakness. She said of herself: "And I, everybody's dupe, as you are aware;" or again: "You know I follow others, but invent nothing myself." Amusing instances could be cited from her letters of the ease with which her friends induced her to change her mind. This was of course a defect in her character as a woman, but it has added many beauties to her style as a writer. By promptly sharing the emotions of others she added to her own, and her wit is excited and kindled by theirs. When she talks we hear not her alone, but the echo of the great minds she associated with. It seems to me that we can tell by her mode of expressing herself what people she has just left, and from whom she has derived the observations and narratives which she repeats to her daughter. Had she not passed the day in Rochefoucauld's company at Madame de Lafayette's when she so shrewdly portrays the good D'Hacqueville in love, unwillingly and

unwittingly? " You ask for the symptoms of this love: first, there is a hasty and uncalled-for denial; there is an air of excessive indifference which proves the contrary; there is a suspension of all earthly activity; there is the relinquishment of all ordinary cares and a preoccupation with a single one; there is a continuous volley of satire directed against old people in love: 'Really, I had need be very foolish, very crazy! What! take a young wife? That would be a pretty business for me! That, forsooth, would just suit me! I had rather have both arms broken.' To this you respond mentally, 'Yes, of course all that is true; but you are in love, none the less. You tell us your thoughts; they are just, they are true, they torment you; but for all that you are in love. You are chock-full of reason; but love is stronger than all your reasons. You are ill, you weep, you storm—and you are in love.'" In a very sad letter written to her daughter, when on the point of setting out for the Rochers estate, which meant the addition of a hundred leagues to the distance between them, a grand speech on Providence is suddenly encountered: "He who should deprive me of my view of Providence would deprive me of my only blessing; and if I thought it was in our power to arrange plans

or disarrange them, to act or refrain from action, to decide one way or the other, I should not find one moment's peace. To my mind the Author of the universe must be the cause of all that happens. When I must needs blame Him, I blame no one, and submit. . . . It was decreed that there should be a Madame de Sévigné loving her daughter more than any other mother loves hers, that she should be often far away from this daughter, and that the keenest sufferings she should experience in this life should be occasioned by this dear child." This time we need not seek far to find those who suggested her thoughts. She herself tells us that she had just been dining with very intelligent people "who did not deprive her of this opinion." They were her dear friends from Port Royal, and they had unfolded before her their great doctrine of Grace which she does no more than apply to her individual situation. One of her finest letters is that in which she describes the reception of the Knights of the Order of the Holy Spirit in the great promotions of 1674, in which her son-in-law shared. She was not present herself, but Coulanges went to Versailles on purpose to see it, and she tells us that he has just given her an account of it. She really had no need to tell us, for it seems

to me that without being informed of it we should readily have perceived his voice, his gestures, his spirit of buffoonery and parody, ever disclosing to him the humorous side of serious matters. It is just like him to seize, and note in passing, the burlesque incidents of this majestic ceremonial,—La Trousse's disordered wig, and the circumstance of M. de Montchevreul and M. de Villars getting so desperately hooked together that no human hand could separate them. “The more they tried, the more of a tangle they made of it, like Roger’s rings. Finally, the whole ceremony, all the courtesies, all the manœuvres remaining at a standstill, they had to be violently torn asunder, and main strength won the day.” It was the same Coulanges, amusing little man that he was, who reported the accident which befell the honest D’Hocquincourt. “He was dressed like the men of Provence and Brittany, so that his breeches as royal page being less roomy than his ordinary ones, his shirt would never consent to remain within them, no matter how he pleaded with it; for, conscious of his condition, he was constantly trying to arrange it, always in vain; so that finally My Lady the Dauphiness could no longer keep from peals of laughter. This was a great pity; His Majesty the King was

on the point of breaking down; and never had there been known in the annals of this knightly order an instance of such a mischance." To adapt herself in this way to others, to appropriate their wit and receive from it the stimulus to excite her own, "to invent nothing," but to lend new fascination to ideas coming from other sources, to renew the youth and freshness of these ideas by the keenness of her perception and the ingenuity of her expression,—such is the characteristic charm of woman. In this respect it may be said that Madame de Sévigné was more truly a woman than any other. Her qualities are those which we expect to find, and which please us most, in persons of her sex,—not original powers and creative gifts, but this talent for reflecting those they love, entering into their ideas, and giving these more vigor and animation by reproducing them.

With such qualities, it is not surprising that her style does not essentially differ from that of her contemporaries. She writes as the rest do, though she writes better than they. Even when recounting trifles her diction is flowing and periodic; it is never heavy like that of Madame de Longueville or Madame de Sablé, though it ordinarily has fulness and amplitude. Long explanations are not distasteful to her;

she emphasizes her ideas and repeats them; occasionally she knows how to make oratorical flights: this was a common practice with those about her. But she also has her personal modes of speech; she creates expressions which are all her own, and which are freer and livelier than those employed in the seventeenth century by professional authors. When she passes through Burgundy, in amazement at the fertility of the country, she does not hesitate to say, "Everything here is bursting with wheat." Referring to a trip M. de Marsillac made through his domain to repair damages, she says: "He stopped neither for sport nor for excursions; he had with him Gourville, who has not often time to give, and conducted him like a river through all his lands to bring them fatness and fertility." I know of none except her and Saint-Simon who then wrote in so original a way; and they are perhaps the only two who did not trouble their heads about the public. She thought that her letters would never get outside of the private circle to which they were addressed; and as for Saint-Simon, since he had postponed for a century the publication of his "Memoirs," the fear of his remote readers could not much interfere with his freedom of expression.

When one has just been reading Madame de Sévigné's letters, it is natural that one should be rather surprised that a writer of such talent, who knew she possessed it, should not have been tempted to write some connected work. Why, for instance, did she not compose memoirs like Madame de Motteville, treatises on social ethics like Madame de Lambert, or novels like Madame de Lafayette? Sometimes such regrets are expressed; and it would at first seem that with her fortunate natural gifts, and her wealth of imagination, she might have left us some great work. Perhaps we are wrong in thinking so. The qualities we admire in her letters are not such as a long work requires. Success in such a work involves the power of self-restraint and self-mastery, ability to take time for reflection, skill in planning and combining beforehand. These are habits difficult of acquirement for one who is accustomed in writing to give up to the impulse of the moment and let the pen run on at random. It has been observed that journalists, who are obliged to improvise an article every day, and who become able to do this with wonderful skill, can at last produce nothing but articles, and are incapable of composing a book. Madame de Lafayette wrote such good novels, just

because her temperament did not resemble her friend's, and because she controlled her talents differently. It is easy to see that Nature had intended her to be a professional author. Her letters, irreproachable in their form, full of a discreet and charming intelligence, are generally short and unadorned. Hers is the tone of a woman who makes reserves, and is secretly preparing material for a work she has in view. Madame de Sévigné, on the contrary, pours out all her heart, and when once she has taken her pen, keeps nothing back. It is probable, then, that if it had suddenly occurred to her to write another "Princess of Cleves" in imitation of Madame de Lafayette, she would have found herself devoid of material and ill-prepared, and would perhaps have had less success than we are inclined to suppose. But she has left us her letters; and what more can we ask?

PART III.

THE WORK.

ALL are agreed that one of the chief advantages derivable from a genuine correspondence coming from intelligent and well-informed people consists in its enabling us to gain a more intimate acquaintance with the society of which they speak. As they do not know that we are to read their letters, they do not think of influencing our opinions, and have no thesis or system to advocate. They give us, concerning events, those first impressions which are the best ones. They show us how things looked in their times, and make us their contemporaries; so that with their letters before us we can judge better for ourselves and form our own opinion.

Madame de Sévigné performs this service for us better than any one else, because she possesses in the highest degree the power of giving life to what she tells. We can treat her letters, then, as genuine historical documents; but if we propose to extract from them all the information they could furnish regarding her times, the task would be an

endless one. We must limit ourselves, and select a subject for investigation. Let us suppose that we have just read her entire correspondence, and that, closing the book and relying on memory, we ask ourselves what impression she gives us of the people she knew, in what respects society then resembled that of our day, and in what the differences consist. It is equally important to throw light upon each of these points; for if it is of great interest to display that common nature by virtue of which all men resemble one another and recognize their common kinship, it is no less interesting to see how customs, ideas, and even feelings change from age to age. From this we learn that what now exists has not always been as it is, and how it might be different. Though this is a very elementary truth, it is not one of which we are at first aware. Yet it is very important to fix it in the mind, in order to prevent us from being too infatuated with our own opinions, too firmly anchored to our prejudices, and too rebellious against all useful changes.

I.

THE correspondence of Madame de Sévigné being composed mainly of letters to Madame

de Grignan, what it first reveals to us is family life. It might be thought that with regard to this we should not have many unusual things to notice. The relations between a mother and her children do not appear to be subject to much change from age to age. It would seem that an affection so purely natural must always manifest itself in about the same way. Yet from the very first letters it may be perceived, by certain peculiarities, that they were not written in our day.

In the first place, their tone is almost always respectful and measured, and they are pervaded by a gravity surprising to us. Surely no mother is nowadays so formal in chatting with her daughter. I know very well that we must not be deceived by appearances; the surprise that we feel in reading these letters is largely attributable to an external cause. The nearest relatives had not yet acquired the habit of saying "thee" and "thou;"¹ the "you" by which they address each other, so contrary to present French usage, is enough to change the appearance of these confidential notes for us, and to give them an air of constraint and frigidity. Among Bussy's letters

¹ Like our English forefathers, the French employ the pronominal forms corresponding to "thou," "thee," "thy," in familiar intercourse.—TR.

we find a rather curious proof of the repugnance that was felt to employing too familiar forms in intercourse. Father Bouhours writes to him that he is extremely shocked to see the unceremonious way in which the poets permit themselves to "thee" and "thou" kings and princes: —

"Great monarch! sheathe thy conquering sword,
Or I'll lay down my pen."¹

"The Latin, to be sure," said he, "does this in verse, but only because it does so in prose. It is not at all the same in our language, in which 'thee' and 'thou' are only used to servants and inferiors; and so true is this, that a lover would never say either 'thee' or 'thou' to his lady-love."

Bussy is, in the main, of his opinion, and like him would wish to require of the poets more respect toward his Sovereign Majesty. On a single point he makes a reservation, saying: "It is not true, reverend Father, that a lover never says 'thee' and 'thou' to his lady; but you could not be expected to know that." Bussy himself knew it very well, since he had had occasion to write many letters of that nature. The darling daughter by his side, the beautiful and romantic Marchioness of

¹ Boileau, "Epistle to the King," line 1. — TR.

Coligny, who was in love with La Rivière,—a man of doubtful nobility but undoubtedly dishonest,—was also quite well aware of it. We have the despairing letter she wrote to her lover to inform him that she was to be forever separated from him. “Thou mayst well believe,” she says to him, “that it will not be difficult to persuade me to abandon life. This is the sweetest thing in store for me, since I have lost thee. Seek not to see me; nothing would be more dangerous for thee and me: neither seek to write to me without extreme precautions, for they take strange measures to find out if we write to each other. Farewell my all; I am dying, thank God!” Could Father Bouhours have read this letter he would indeed have been forced to confess that lovers “sometimes say ‘thee’ and ‘thou;’” but certain it is that it required circumstances as critical, and a passion as violent, to cause people to break away from the ordinary forms.

I have found only a single passage in all the letters of Madame de Sévigné, in which she allows herself the use of “thee” and “thou.” She was at the Rochers château in one of those sad and lonely moments when her daughter’s absence drove her to distraction. “You actually say that Grignan sends me kisses. You are getting too familiar, my dear

Grignan. Do come and play a game of mall on my lawn, I beseech thee; it is such fine weather, and I so want to see you play, you play so gracefully, you make such fine strokes. You are very cruel to refuse me just one hour's pleasure. And you, my love, come, we will talk. Alas! I am sad enough to weep." Observe that it is her son-in-law to whom she uses "thee," not her daughter; the Countess of Grignan demanded respect. She was even so formal that one day, speaking to Madame de Sévigné of the Baron de Chantal, she called him "my lord, your father." "It made me feel as if we were not related," replied her mother, a little put out. "What do you think was his relation to you?"

These, however, are, I repeat, only external forms, which alter nothing essential. We must beware of drawing from them too rigorous inferences of any kind. I know some people who, enamoured of the good old times, and determined to hold them up as a model in everything, greatly admire this respectful use of "you" between relatives, thinking that it helps to preserve a certain dignity in the most familiar intercourse. To undeceive themselves they have only to read the extremely bold disclosures made by the mother to the daughter concerning the conduct of Charles de Sévigné,

and concerning his love affairs with Ninon de Lenclos and the handsome Duchess de Villeroy,—amours which had for him such disagreeable consequences,—and to note with what pleasure the daughter listens to all this, told as it is in her mother's beautiful language. It will readily be acknowledged that all seriousness is absent from these frivolous tales. To those again who contend that the "you" is awkward, because it puts a constraint on familiar intercourse and produces a certain frigid fashion of expressing the feelings, the whole correspondence of Madame de Sévigné will show that in order to love passionately, and to express such love, there is no need of saying "thee" and "thou."

It is true that we must not judge this whole epoch by the single instance of Madame de Sévigné. She was an exception in her times. These effusions of tenderness for her daughter, of which she is so lavish in her letters and which she could not altogether restrain in every-day life, caused some surprise around her. Evidently people were not used to it. Madame de Grignan feared that her mother would be censured for these outbursts of feeling, and she trembled lest she herself should be involved in the ridicule which Madame de Sévigné seemed to invite. It is certain, then,

that people did not usually go so far as Madame de Sévigné, and that it was in good taste to be somewhat reserved in the expression of the feelings. Nowadays they are expressed as unreservedly as they are felt; it even seems that instead of restraint there is a fashion of making a display of them. People now openly plume themselves upon what they once discreetly concealed. This is a difference which it is important to point out.

But the difference is even greater, and is not wholly confined to appearances. We must even acknowledge, however surprising it may be, that mothers have not always loved their children in the same way; that in the treatment of them, in the care taken of them, in the place assigned them, in the importance allowed them, there are from age to age perceptible changes. Antiquity had no tenderness toward the new-born babes. "The child," says Tacitus, "was handed over immediately after birth to a wretched Greek slave-woman, with whom were associated two or three of her slave companions, usually the most worthless, and the most incapable of any serious employment." The mother hardly ever paid any attention to her offspring; and as they occupied but little place in her life, they had scarcely any in her affections. Cicero in one of his letters speaks

of his daughter's poor little child that died. His expressions are strangely cold and unfeeling. He almost calls it an abortion: "Quod natum est, perimbecillimum est."¹ The explanation of this coldness is to be found in the following phrase from his "*Tusculan Disputations*": "When a child dies young, we are easily consoled; and if it dies in the cradle we pay no attention to it." If a wife presented her husband with a deformed child, or one he was simply unwilling to support, law and custom authorized him to expose it before his door, where it died of cold and hunger unless some passer-by carried it home to do with it what he pleased. Seneca considered this a very natural custom; and the Emperor Constantine was the first to whom it occurred to be shocked at it and to forbid it. Of course there was nothing like this in the society of the seventeenth century; and yet it may be said that, at least up to a certain age, children did not fill so important a place as to-day in their mother's life. Pleasures and engagements did not leave time to take care of children. Society was so agreeable and so

¹ This quotation, which should read, "Quod quidem est natum perimbecillum est" ("Indeed, what is born is a very feeble thing"), is found in Cicero's "*Letters to Atticus*," x. 18, 1. — TR.

exacting! Parents had so many duties to fulfil, so many visits to pay and to receive! Accordingly they sent their daughters to a convent as soon as possible, to be rid of them, and once there, were fain to leave them there. The sons, when they had hardly yet the first glimmerings of reason, the parents gave over to a tutor, and were more careful to select a person of undoubted noble lineage, of which they could boast, than a worthy man suited to the duties intrusted to him.

All this is perceived clearly enough from the correspondence of Madame de Sévigné. Some differences of opinion on this head, however, can be detected between her and her daughter, of which perhaps they were themselves not fully aware. The daughter yields in everything to the prejudices of the time, while the mother often resists them. Madame de Grignan's first child was not well received; it was a girl, and they expected a boy. There is much disappointment and sadness in the few words the young mother wrote from her bed to M. de Grignan, whom official duties detained in Provence: "If my good health can console you for having only a daughter, I shall not ask your pardon for not giving you a son. I am out of all danger, and anxious to join you. My mother will tell you the rest." The mother

takes the pen, but speaks in a different tone. She soon gets over her disappointment, and from the first we feel that her good-humor is unimpaired. “ Madame de Puisieux dit que, si vous avez envie d'avoir un fils, vous preniez la peine de le faire: je trouve ce discours le plus juste et le meilleur du monde. Vous nous avez laissé une petite fille, nous vous la rendons.” Some months later, when Madame de Grignan set out to rejoin her husband, the child, not appearing strong enough to endure the long journey, was left with her grandmother. Madame de Sévigné took her task seriously. She did not turn it over to others, as those around her so often did. Every one should read the amusing letter in which she relates to her daughter, with the good-humor that had shocked the Chevalier de Perrin, how she had installed at her house a new nurse, and what pleasure she took in seeing her grand-daughter recovering her health. “ She never was so well nourished. Her other nurse had but little milk; this one has as much as a cow. She is an honest, artless peasant woman of twenty-four years, with beautiful teeth, black hair, and sun-brown complexion. She has had milk four months; her child is fair as an angel. . . . Your little girl grows lovable; we are becoming attached to her. In a fortnight she

will be a chubby oaf, white as snow and laughing incessantly. These, my dear, are trifling details. You no longer know me; I have become a genuine gossip, and am going to be the oracle of the neighborhood." The same thing happened that usually happens in such circumstances. As it is in the order of nature that people should become attached to children in proportion to the trouble they cost and the care taken of them, Madame de Sévigné acquired a very ardent affection for the girl she calls "her little sweetheart." She would have been very glad to take her away to the Rochers chateau, for the child would have been a charming companion, and would have given her agreeable occupation in this lonely place. But Madame du Puy-du-Fou, a person of sense and experience, advised against it: "She said that it would be risking the child's health, whereupon I yielded. I should not be willing to imperil her little person; I am quite in love with her. I have had her hair cut, and dressed in hurly-burly style, which just suits her. Her complexion, her throat, all her little body is wonderful. She does a hundred little things,—babbling, coaxing, striking, making the sign of the cross, asking pardon, making a bow, kissing her hand, shrugging her shoulders, dancing, wheedling, pluck-

ing your chin; in a word, she is charming every way. I amuse myself with her for hours together. The little thing shall not die, if I can help it. As I told you the other day, I do not know how one manages not to love one's daughter." Madame de Grignan doubtless loved her daughter, but not enough to save her from the fate awaiting most of the girls in those noble families which were so involved in debt. The sweet and gentle Marie-Blanche was early banished from her father's house. They would not have her acquire a love for home, for she was not to stay there. She was five years old when they took her to a convent, and she never came back. At fifteen, she took the veil, without any one's inquiring whether this austere life suited her. Her grandmother alone, far away, uttered her lament, gentle as a stifled sigh: "Poor child, how fortunate she is, if she is satisfied! That is the case, of course; but you understand my meaning."

Madame de Grignan's second daughter, Pauline, was not born at Paris, as Marie-Blanche had been, and it was long before Madame de Sévigné knew her. The grandmother seems to have made some efforts to avoid becoming attached to this girl. "Do I care for that child?" she said, denying herself this affection, as if it would be robbing

her daughter. "I am yours above all else. You know how far I am from that dotage which quickly diverts the mother's love from the children to the grandchildren. My love has stopped short at the first stage, and I am fond of these little ones only out of love to you." But resistance was vain; her affectionate nature was too strong for her. She was surprised to find it so: "Could it really be possible that I should still find room for more love and for new attachments?" But at the same time she perceived with sadness that her daughter's feeling was not like hers. "It seems to me," she said straightforwardly, "that I do love her, and that you do not love her enough." In fact, the mother begins to find in Pauline faults requiring the convent for their correction, and at the same time qualities announcing that the girl was called to a religious life. At these tidings Madame de Sévigné becomes first uneasy and then angry; the girl must be kept at home, even if it be necessary to marry her in Béarn¹ or not to marry her at all; they must enjoy the pleasure of training and perfecting her character. And the grandmother continually repeats this exhortation, which sounds very strange to us, addressed to a mother: "Do love, do love Pauline." The reason was

¹ The nobility of Béarn were proverbially poor.—TR.

that Madame de Grignan then had a son, and that, according to the custom in noble families, all the rest of the children were to be sacrificed to him. But mark what is more extraordinary still. This son of whom they are so proud, and whom his native Provence served as godmother;¹ this son who from his birth took the foremost place in the affections of the family, for whose sake they intend to send Pauline to join Marie-Blanche in her Convent of Aubenas; this son, so long as he is a child, has no attention paid to him, is neglected, is ill-bred. The mother leaves him at Grignan during her journeys to Paris, and passes years without seeing him; even when she is at home she turns him over to the servants, and friends inform Madame de Sévigné that "he is being badly spoiled by the valets." The grandmother, sending good advice to her daughter, felt the need of adding these significant words: "You do not yet understand a mother's love any too well. So much the better, my daughter; it is violent."

Perhaps we should not be too hard with Madame de Grignan; she only did as others did. Times have greatly changed since then. People in our day no longer sacrifice their

¹ He was held at the christening by proxies for the land of Provence, and was named Louis-Provence.—TR.

children to one another,—they sacrifice themselves to their children. The children are no longer left among the servants in the ante-chambers; they are brought in and rule the drawing-room; they have become the masters, often the tyrants, of the family. Although sometimes the consequence attached to them is a trifle excessive, and they are tempted to abuse it, we must confess that it is better to err on this side than on the other, and that, in this respect at least, our social life is superior to that of our fathers.

II.

IT is probable that if any indiscretion should permit us to open one of those bulky packages of letters which the railroads carry every day in all directions, we should find less pleasure in reading them than we suppose, and should at once be impressed with the monotony of their contents. Life making the same demands upon every one, and running in the same grooves, it follows that all have about the same things to tell one another. Whether conversing or writing, eighty times out of a hundred they make inquiries about health or talk of business. These are the ordinary subjects of letters; and we shall see that Madame

de Sévigné, notwithstanding all the originality of her mind, is no more exempt from such commonplaces than others are.

As she had long been very well, in the earlier letters she is not uneasy about her own health, but about that of others. Causes of anxiety are not wanting; it seems sometimes as if an ill wind had blown upon all her friends. Her letters are full of sad tidings: the Cardinal de Retz is dying at Commercy; Madame de Lafayette is wasting away with a slow fever by the side of La Rochefoucauld, who is tied to his chair by the gout; Corbinelli is suffering with headaches "verging on frenzy," and is only sustained by draughts of potable gold. Besides this private circle of friends, about whom Madame de Sévigné is always concerned, there are less familiar acquaintances among whom disease makes many ravages. At St. Germain and Versailles, where the ground was constantly turned up to build palaces, construct terraces, excavate reservoirs, the fever abode permanently. Even the king and his family did not escape it; the courtiers were decimated, and those who resisted the fever succumbed to small-pox, rheumatism, apoplexy. Then comes the "numerous company of hypochondriacs," fashionable men and women wearied by late hours, worn out

by pleasures, sick of disappointed ambitions and blighted hopes, pained by their own failures and by the success of others, ceaselessly anxious, aimlessly excited, attacked by those vague indispositions whose effects are all the harder to bear because the symptoms seem less dangerous. Amid all these sickly bodies stands out the robust form of the German woman¹ who came from the Palatinate to take the vacant place of Henrietta d'Orleans at the Palais-Royal. Broad-shouldered, stout and ruddy, she formed a strange contrast to all these frail, lymphatic women living on medicines. "When her physician was presented to her, she said she had no use for one, she had never either been bled or purged; when she felt ill, she went two leagues on foot, and that cured her."

After having long been anxious about all her friends, Madame de Sévigné was finally compelled to be alarmed about herself. At fifty years of age her triumphant health, as she called it, sustained its first defeat. While at the Rochers estate she had a violent attack of rheumatism. For three months she "was tortured to the point of screaming;" but her

¹ The Princess Palatine, Charlotte Elizabeth of Bavaria, second wife of Philip, Duke of Orleans, the brother of Louis XIV.—TR.

only anxiety was to reassure her daughter. In each of her letters, dictated to her son or to her friends, she records a perceptible improvement and promises a speedy cure; but the cure is constantly postponed, and when she has exhausted all remedies she makes up her mind to set out for Vichy to try its waters.

Out of the letters she wrote from Vichy and from Bourbon an interesting picture could be made of the life people then led at watering-places. It was not brilliant and delightful as it is to-day. In those days people were not accustomed to go there for pleasure. "When one does not drink the waters," said Madame de Sévigné, "it is tiresome." Every one's chief business was, therefore, to take care of himself. In the morning they took the waters. "At six o'clock we go to the fountain; we all meet there, drink, and make a wry face; for just think of it, boiling hot, and with a very disagreeable taste of saltpetre. We turn away, we go and come, we take a walk, we hear mass, we compare notes confidentially concerning the effect of the waters; that is all we think about till noon." Then comes the douche, a much more formidable affair. "I began taking the douche to-day; it is a very fair rehearsal of purgatory. You find yourself naked in a little

underground cell, where there is a pipe of this hot water which a woman lets fly over you where you please. . . . At first you receive the shock everywhere, to rouse all your spirits, and then it is applied to the joints affected; but when it comes to the nape of the neck you feel such a heat and shock as cannot be conceived. Nevertheless this is the main point of the whole matter. All must be endured, and you endure it all, and are not burned, and then get into a warm bed where you sweat profusely, and that cures you." In the intervals there were calls and parties. Madame de Sévigné's social relations were so extensive that she could hardly fail to meet acquaintances whom she enjoyed seeing and conversing with, even at Vichy and Bourbon. She found there too among the number some ridiculous characters, at whose expense she occasionally made merry, and this helped to pass the time. "I should never have expected to see at Vichy such hideous visages." There was Madame de Péquigny, the *Cumean Sibyl*, "seeking a cure for the seventy-six years which she found extremely annoying." There was a Madame de la Barois, "all a-tremble with the palsy;" this poor woman, after twenty years of widowhood, had become enamoured of a young man to whom she gave all her prop-

erty, and who betrayed her. "It is a great good fortune," Madame de Sévigné had said in a similar case, "not to be inclined to become infatuated with such goslings; it is far better to let them seek their pasture than to provide it for them." There too was the Duchess de Brissac, a very pretty and very stylish woman, whose mania it was to have a crowd of admirers always about her. Vichy did not offer so large a choice of adorers as Paris or Versailles, but necessity made this duchess less fastidious. She could put up with very commonplace conquests; for want of better game, priests, and even monks, would do. "You should see how she coquets with everybody, without distinction or selection. With my own eyes I saw her the other day singeing a poor Celestine monk." Besides the pleasures of chatting with her friends and making fun of her neighbors, Madame de Sévigné could enjoy a walk through the neighboring fields when she felt strong, and, in the evening, the sight of the young country girls who came to dance the boree to the sound of the fiddle and the tambourine, "with certain free antics which make the parsons scold." These were pretty much the only diversions afforded by watering-places to those who did not wish to risk being bored to death in order to be cured of their diseases.

It will surprise nobody that Madame de Sévigné, who so long as her health was good was in the habit of declaring her utter scorn of physicians, changed her tone completely when she saw her daughter sick and herself attacked by rheumatism. Such changes are natural. Thenceforward her correspondence is full of advice given or received, of talk about diseases, of medical consultations. At every turn there are criticisms, disquisitions, discussions; mother and daughter were not always of the same opinion. Madame de Grignan was fond of chocolate; Madame de Sévigné was distrustful of it, and cited frightful instances of its injurious effects: "La marquise de Coëtlogon prit tant de chocolat, étant grosse l'année passée, qu'elle accoucha d'un petit garçon noir comme un diable, qui mourut." Still more disputes arose over coffee. Doctors disagreed as to the effects it produced. "Du Chesne abominates it, Brother Angelo has not a word to say against it; while it fattens one, it makes another lean." What was to be done in such a dilemma? People tried to render the drink harmless by pouring in cream or sweetening it with honey; and then, as they thought it still harmful, they came to a heroic decision, — they banished it in disgrace from their

tables. Tea, on making its appearance in society, was better received. “The princess takes twelve cups every day. She says that it cures all her ills. She assured me that his Highness the Landgrave took forty cups every morning. ‘Why, Madame, was it not perhaps thirty?’ ‘No, forty; he was dying: it restored him to life in a twinkling.’” If her daughter is in the least unwell, Madame de Sévigné’s imagination takes the field. Straightway she seeks out all the physicians she can find, and after the physicians all the quacks and charlatans of the day, whose name was legion. Everybody, even the women, pretended to have wonderful secrets capable of baffling the most obstinate diseases. Madame Fouquet applied to the dying queen a plaster which cured her, to the great scandal of the medical faculty, who had given her up; the Princess of Taranto dispensed her drugs to all the people of Vitré. “She is the best doctor in the world; she has some rare and precious prescriptions of which she gave us three doses that had a miraculous effect.” There is nothing so amusing as to hear Madame de Sévigné when she has just been talking with Fagon or with Du Chesne. She is full of her subject, and speaks learnedly in professional terms, like one of Molière’s doctors. “He tells me that

you must not let yourself die of inanition. When digestion takes too long, you must eat; this consumes a remnant that merely reeks and putrefies unless you heat it again by alimentation." Above all, she begs her daughter to take care of herself, and sets her a good example. She announces that she has been taking medicine to please her, and adds in a suppliant tone: "Pray, do as much for me too." By every post she sends her daughter new remedies. Some are as mild as cherry cordial, "to which France is indebted for the preservation of M. Colbert;" or periwinkle tea, which restored the youth of Madame de Grignan. "When you returned so beautiful, people said, 'Why! on what herb has she been treading?' I answered, 'On periwinkle.'" There are other nostrums, such as viper broth and powdered eyes of crayfish, that seem more formidable. But what follows is still more extraordinary. The Capuchins, who also dabbled in physic, doctored Madame de Sévigné's leg with herbs which were removed twice a day, reeking with moisture, and buried. Then just in proportion as they decayed, the place to which they had been applied perspired and became flexible. Madame de Sévigné did not doubt the efficacy of this remedy. "It would be a pity," she

wrote to her daughter, "for you not to tell this to the surgeons; they would die a-laughing; but I defy them." I find something better still in the Bussy correspondence. "Il y a ici un abbé," Madame de Scudéry wrote to Bussy, "qui fait grand bruit et qui guérit par les sympathies. On dit qu'il prend, pour toutes les fièvres, de l'urine des malades dans laquelle il fait noircir un œuf cassé, et il le donne à manger à un chien. Il prétend que le chien meurt et que le malade guérit." And she adds with entire confidence, "On dit qu'il guérit force gens." Of course I do not mean to imply that we no longer trust to quacks, and that odd prescriptions no longer find people to believe in them; yet it seems to me that nowadays witty and sensible women like Madame de Scudéry and Madame de Sévigné would be a little more distrustful than they were of the Capuchins' herbs and of the abbé who cured by sympathy.

III.

NEXT to health, what occupies most space in Madame de Sévigné's letters is business. Throughout, the talk is of the pecuniary embarrassments that were felt, and of the devices employed to escape them. The French arist-

tocracy — never very thrifty — was then on the verge of ruin. “Nobody has a cent left,” said Madame de Sévigné; “there is no money to be borrowed.” This was the common predicament. The great lords, allured to the court of the king, there found occasion to spend enormous sums. Worse yet, they acquired luxurious habits which they carried away with them and transmitted to all the inferior gentry. From the highest to the lowest rank, from Versailles to the humblest manor-house, all the nobles made efforts to eclipse their peers and to rival their superiors, thus making fatal drafts upon their long-since crippled fortunes.

To sustain themselves they had but one resource, — the bounty of the king. Without it all these nobles, having nothing left, would have been reduced to “eat bread made of leaves and ferns.” Thus the dream of all these hungry people was to secure a governorship, an office at court, or at least a pension or some gratuity. For such emoluments they fought furiously and begged shamelessly. Referring to the king, Bussy wrote to Madame de Sévigné: “I shall still embrace his knees, and so often as finally, perhaps, to reach his purse.” His daughter, rather ashamed of this, had erased the end of the sentence, making it

read, "reach his heart." But Bussy was not so modest; he had the true beggar's effrontery.

These solicitations, this obsequiousness and meanness, sometimes succeeded. There were favorites who made immense fortunes at this trade. What was thus earned by ministers, by mistresses and their tools, by flatterers, by friends,—house-valets, Saint-Simon calls them,—is incalculable. Let us recall what Coulanges says to his cousin of the immense possessions which Madame de Louvois, who was at the time his hostess, had in lower Burgundy: "When the weather is fine enough to be inviting, we take long trips to ascertain the extent of these domains; and when curiosity leads us to ask the name of the first village, we say, 'Whose is it?' and are answered, 'It belongs to My Lady.' 'Whose is that one farthest distant?'—'It belongs to My Lady.' 'But that other one I see away over there?'—'It belongs to My Lady.' 'And these woods?'—'They belong to My Lady.' 'What an extensive plain!'—'It belongs to My Lady.' 'I behold yonder a fine castle.'—'That is Nicei, now My Lady's, a large estate formerly owned by the ancient counts of that name.' 'What is that other castle on the height?'—'That is Pacy, which belongs to My Lady, and descended to her

from the family of Mandelot, whence sprang her great-grandmother.' In a word, Madame, everything in this country belongs to 'My Lady;' I never saw possessions so extensive, nor so well rounded out." But this was an exceptional case; others waited long and made many applications, only to receive a paltry reward for their assiduity and their services. Yet they were not discouraged; they kept going through the great halls at Versailles and putting themselves in the king's way to remind him of their existence. As they had no other way of settling their affairs, they desired always to live in the sunshine of that royal bounty to which they looked for their material salvation. At every fresh instance of the king's liberality to his favorites they plucked up heart and said, in the language of Madame de Sévigné: "We must not despair. What though we are not his body-servants; if we pay court to him, he may chance to let some droppings fall on us."

Madame de Sévigné herself was rich. She reckoned up one day for her daughter that she had been worth some five hundred and thirty thousand livres,¹ a sum equivalent in our day to a little more than two millions of francs. This fine fortune would scarcely have held

¹ The Parisian livre was twenty-five sous, or cents.—TR.

out against the follies of M. de Sévigné if he had lived longer. The money slipped quickly through the hands of this licentious and prodigal husband. When he died, after six years of wedded life, the poor widow was half ruined. Fortunately she had, to help her out of her embarrassment, the skill and devotion of her uncle, the Abbé de Coulanges, who had been her tutor and was now her steward.

This "dear, good man," as his niece called him, is an odd figure. Though he did not often say mass, and with all humility blames himself in his will "for having dishonored and profaned the sanctity of his calling by a life too much diverted from the employments to which it should have been entirely consecrated," he was a pious man, of correct morals, and an implicit and devout believer "who shed a flood of tears every time he received the host." It is certain that the profession he was bred to suited him poorly. His family made him a priest; Nature had made him rather a man of business. To keep his accounts correct—a duty which many regard as somewhat austere—was to him a diversion and a pleasure. His greatest amusement consisted in manipulating those counters, "so trusty and so true," by whose aid he did his reckoning. For order and economy there was

nobody like him; he performed all sorts of services for the household. He made leases, prosecuted lawsuits, looked after the tenant farmers, settled accounts. When he bargained with the dealers he always obtained better terms than anybody else, and of course he was very proud of this. It was he who one day found for Madame de Grignan those lodgings, with very respectable rooms, a coach-house, and a stable for six horses, all for five hundred livres a year. At another time, Charles de Sévigné having tried to bargain for a boat to take his mother to Nantes, the Abbé had but to speak, to get it for a pistole less than his nephew. Along with so many good qualities, he had some odd peccadilloes, and Madame de Sévigné, who, despite her affection, perceived them clearly, gives us a highly amusing portrayal of them. In the first place, he sometimes got angry, but chiefly with false reasoners and bad calculators. “When arithmetic is offended against, and the rule of *two and two make four* is in any respect infringed, the good Abbé is beside himself.” He had not a very brilliant mind. His niece travelling alone with him on her way to the Rochers estate, and knowing very well that she must not depend too much upon the charms of his conversation, had provided herself with a good

book, "The Life of Cardinal Commendon," translated by Fléchier. "I regard it as very fortunate," she said to her daughter, "that I am a being capable of thinking and reading; our good Abbé alone would furnish me little entertainment: you know that he is quite taken up by 'the bright eyes of his cash-box.'¹ But while he looks at it and inspects it from all points of view, Cardinal Commendon keeps me very good company." The Abbé was fond of good cheer, and liked to linger at table; he made a pretext of drinking the health of Madame de Grignan, and when the wine was good he expatiated copiously in praise of it. While accompanying his niece to Vichy he was so well treated at the mansion of the generous Guitaut family in Burgundy, and indulged in such excellent and prolonged repasts, that Madame de Sévigné made him drink the waters, "to empty his stomach, which he had filled to repletion at Époisses." But these pleasantries did not prevent her from expressing all the gratitude she justly owed him. On his death she wrote to Bussy, who did not like him: "There is no benefit he did not bestow upon me. He extricated me from the straits I was in at the death of M. de Sévigné. He

¹ A free quotation from Molière's "Miser," Act v. Scene iii.—TR.

gained lawsuits, he put my estates in good condition, he paid my debts, he married my children,—in a word, it is to his constant care that I owe the peace and repose of my life." And returning to the same subject two months later, she again eulogized the Abbé to Bussy, concluding with these words: "He lived as a man of honor, he died as a Christian; God grant us the like grace!"

The niece of the Abbé de Coulanges was quite worthy of him. Her taste for intellectual pleasures did not deprive her of business tact. She brought to business, as to other things, a certain acuteness that was her pride. One day we see her rejoicing that she had, in a difficult case, hit upon a shrewd expedient of which "the dear, good man" had not thought. Racine, writing to one of his sons who affected the airs of a nobleman, and scattered money without counting it, said to him with charming good-nature: "The rest of us, honest, domestic people, act with more simplicity, and think that to keep a strict account of expenses is not beneath a man of honor." On this point Madame de Sévigné was plebeian; and at the Rochers chateau the book is still shown in which she kept a detailed account of all the expenses of her household. I do not know that she could, in case of need, have taken the

cook's place; but she was capable of overseeing those who did occupy that position, and she analyzes their merits with a precision that shows she knew what she was about. Her daughter having charged her to secure a cook for Grignan, she replies: "We dined together,—the chevalier, the Abbé, Corbinelli, and I,—and gave the new cook something of a trial. The fricassee was good, the meat-pie excellent; we gave a little advice about the crust; the fried fish was of a golden color. Really, I believe this man will suit you." It is a pleasure to see so distinguished a woman of the world so expert in household affairs.

It may be affirmed that Madame de Sévigné would never have put her fine fortune in jeopardy; but her children took care to do it. She was obliged to buy for her son a cornetcy and then a sub-lieutenancy in the Dauphin's guards,—offices that were very costly. Moreover, for every new campaign she must furnish him a new equipment. It appears that sometimes the expense seemed to her a little too great, since Charles de Sévigné had recourse, on one occasion, to the intervention of Madame de Lafayette to make his mother relent. Madame de Lafayette in consequence wrote the following letter, which Madame de Sévigné must have considered rather cool:—

"Your son has just left here. He came to bid me good-by, and to beg me to write urging upon you his arguments with regard to money. They are so good that I have no need to explain them to you at length, for you see from where you are the costliness of this endless campaign. All are in despair, and are making ruinous drafts on their fortunes; your son cannot avoid doing somewhat as the rest do: and, besides, your great affection for Madame de Grignan makes it necessary and proper to give evidence of some love for her brother."

Charles de Sévigné was not ruined by war alone; he had also some intervals of extravagance. La Champmeslé, Ninon de Lenclos, his good and bad fortunes in society, cost him a great deal. Once when he was pressed for money and dared not go to his mother for it, he sold timber from the manor of Le Buron, which he owned. Madame de Sévigné was very angry when she learned it, and her ill-humor overflows in a stream of mythology. "Yesterday I was at Le Buron," she wrote to her daughter, "and returned last night. I almost wept when I saw the damage done to this estate. There had stood the oldest wood in the world; my son, on his recent journey, gave it the last fatal axe-strokes. He realized from it four hundred pistoles, of which a month later he had not a cent left. . . . My dear, you must put up with

all this. All those Dryads in distress that I saw yesterday, all the old wood-gods, not knowing now whither to turn, all the ancient crows that had made their abode for two hundred years in the shady horror¹ of this wood, the owls that in this obscure shade announced by their bodeful cries the misfortunes of men,— all these yesterday made me complaints, touching my heart to the quick."

But her daughter cost her dearer still. The great lord whom she had married was Lieutenant-Governor of Provence, and occupied in that country the place of the absentee Governor, the Duke de Vendôme. As M. de Grignan had lofty sentiments and liked to maintain the dignity of his station without counting the cost, the expenses attending his high position were greater than the receipts. His fortunes were already much broken when he married his third wife, Mademoiselle de Sévigné; and unfortunately this wife was not the woman to repair broken fortunes. Even prouder and more infatuated with her rank than was her husband, she only hastened his ruin.

After visiting what is left of Grignan Castle, it is easy to form some idea of the

¹ Madame de Sévigné seems to have in mind Vergil's "horrenti . . . umbra" (*Aeneid*, i. 165).—TR.

grand life they led in these sumptuous abodes, and the expenses of every kind which were the inevitable consequence. Grignan is built upon an eminence towering from the midst of a vast plain. The rock has been cut away, flanked with masonry, surrounded with walls, to form the sort of inaccessible substructure on which the castle is erected. Along the steep sides of the rock wind narrow streets, facing which are the houses of a wretched village, apparently clinging there to live in peace under powerful protection. The entrance to the castle is defended by a massive fortification, pierced with loopholes and flanked by two crenellated towers. When once the gate has been opened, and we are admitted within, the scene changes,—the fortress becomes a palace.

Unfortunately this fortress is to-day almost entirely levelled to the ground, nothing remaining but some masses of wall and some ruined halls; but these ruins are characterized by rare magnitude and elegance. The walls are pierced by spacious windows set between slender pillars, recalling the Renaissance. Within are seen the supports of vaults, friezes finely sculptured, fragments of artistic fire-places. The magnitude of these ruins gives us an idea of the extensiveness of the buildings. When we try to reconstruct them in

thought and to picture the castle as it was, we cannot help being impressed by the wide façades and by the great number of halls and chambers provided. Around about, a paved terrace permits the enjoyment of one of the most beautiful of prospects,—a rich plain dotted with villages, country-seats, castles, and shut in on all sides by high mountains, Mount Lance, the jagged Alps, and snowy Mount Ventoux on the horizon.

Everything about this splendid abode was adapted to foster the pride of its master and to give him a lofty notion of his importance. Everything seemed to impose upon him the duty of maintaining his high rank and of keeping up the magnificence of his ancestors. To people these great halls and give life to this immense castle required always a numerous and brilliant throng. The master's family, with their relatives and most intimate friends, the officers, gentlemen, and pages in waiting upon the governor, of themselves made up a considerable company; there were from eighty to a hundred persons whose permanent home was in the castle. Add to these the invited guests who came from all parts of the province and from the neighboring provinces, and who were received with sumptuous hospitality. Friends or mere acquaintances were lodged

in the castle, with their servants and equipages. It was “an inn” which was never empty. Three tables had to be set in the great hall, and they were always full; this is what Madame de Sévigné calls “the cruel and continual good cheer of Grignan,” against which no fortune could hold out. After this crowd had been fed, it must be amused; accordingly all kinds of entertainment were furnished,—even the opera; and some pride was taken in the rendition of Lulli’s most recent airs. Guests were especially invited to gamble, and the gaming-table was one of the scourges of these lordly idlers. They imitated their superiors; the court at Versailles was much addicted to gambling, and if some expert hands like Dangeau or Langlée gained at play considerable fortunes, most people were ruined. Madame de Montespan lost four hundred thousand pistoles in a single night at the game of basset; and the king’s brother, having incurred a debt of a hundred and fifty thousand crowns, was obliged to pawn his gold plate. Spreading from Versailles, this mania pervaded Paris and the provinces. At Grignan they played deep; and Grignan’s masters, persisting in going deeper than the rest, thus finally went to ruin.

Madame de Sévigné’s sentiments regarding

this ruinous magnificence were divided. She could not quite keep down a sort of maternal pride when she was told of the splendid receptions of Grignan. It pleased her to imagine the fair countess reigning like a queen of Provence "in her castle of Apolidon." But her good sense quickly regained the upper hand. She looked forward with horror to the disasters which these lavish expenses must bring on. To her daughter, who, to calm her, minimizes the sum total of her losses at play, she replies with great prudence that "little showers make bad roads;" to her son-in-law, always anxious about appearances, and desirous of carrying to Paris some of the pomp of Grignan, she wrote that six lackeys would be enough for his wife and him, with six horses for the equipages, and a single body-servant. Above all he must not bring pages. "They are provincial wares which are of no use here." When she sees that she is not listened to, and that expenses go on as before, she at last loses patience. At first she blames her son-in-law: "M. de Grignan's mania for borrowing and for pictures and for furniture is such as no one would believe without seeing it. How can that be made to harmonize with his birth, his pride, and the love that is your due? Does he think that he cannot weary your patience,

and that it is inexhaustible? Has he no pity for you, and does he think we will believe he loves you? A fine pretence of affection!" Then she grows angry with both of them: "There are now no bounds to this; two spendthrifts together, the one demanding everything and the other approving everything, are enough to ruin the world. And was the grandeur and power of this house not a world in itself? I have no words to tell you what I think; my heart is too full. But what are you going to do? I do not at all understand how you will provide for the present and the future. What will happen when a certain point is reached? . . . In a word, this is killing me; all the more because there is no help for it."

As we advance in our reading of this correspondence, we feel that times are getting harder for everybody. Wars are endless and inglorious; money becomes scarcer, the general poverty increases, this whole great nobility is at the last shift. Bussy, who boasted at the beginning of his exile that he had paid debts amounting to one hundred thousand crowns, can no longer meet his current expenses, and his unpaid creditors attach his income. When Madame de La Roche gives him a picture of the general distress at Paris,

he replies with cruel bitterness: "I think affairs are managed much better than they were ten years ago, Madame; there were then thousands and thousands of people who had as good cheer as the king, and enjoyed as much pleasure as he. Now, all this is reserved for the mouth of the master. No one has money or tidbits; each is reduced to his plain piece of beef with his wife; is not that proper?"

By that time M. de Grignan had long been obliged to live by shifts. One loan was met by another at more exorbitant rates. The creditors became angry and made terrible scenes. One tradeswoman of Paris, Madame Rénié, had even the courage to travel a hundred and fifty leagues to demand her money, and made a sudden onslaught upon Grignan, like one of the furies. These distressing incidents did not prevent everything from going on as usual; they led a life of pleasure, they kept open house for all Provence, they equipped companies for their son when he set out for the wars. It is always astonishing to see how people wholly ruined find means to keep afloat for several years with nothing to depend on, and how without fortune, and well-nigh without credit, they continue, nobody knows in what way, to live high and cut a great figure in

society. Madame de Sévigné remarks, concerning what she calls the beggary of the courtiers: "They have never a cent, and yet proceed with all their travels, all their campaigns, follow all the fashions, attend all the balls, all the racing rings, all the lotteries, and go on forever, although utterly undone." But so ticklish is their condition that the least event suffices to disclose their ruin and make it irreparable. "It is a fabric that we dare not touch for fear of upsetting everything." What upset everything, in M. de Grignan's case, was the bankruptcy of the treasurer of Provence. As this treasurer was interested in standing well with the lieutenant-governor, he had advanced M. de Grignan the revenues of his office for no less than three years. M. de Grignan was required to pay it back all at once; pressed by creditors, and no longer able to borrow, the unhappy man was obliged to avow his distress to the minister, M. de Pontchartrain, in a letter closing with these words: "I am without anything to live on."

IV.



WHAT did the poor mother do to relieve this distress? Having already given many unheeded counsels, she was not satisfied in such

urgent cases with a little trite condolence: she aided her daughter so far as fortune allowed her; and that this aid might be more abundant, she left Paris, despite the ties that bound her there and the friends who wished to detain her, and went bravely to live a life of thrift at her country-seat.

The reasons which then brought the great lords to their castles were not the same as those which move the wealthy people of our own time to leave Paris at stated intervals. We have acquired the habit of dividing the year into two parts: we pass the winter in the city and the summer in the country. This is a method of introducing a little more variety into our lives, which would be monotonous if we always stayed in the same place. We go to the country to rest from the fatigues of society, to enjoy a purer air, to find there other sights and other pleasures. But in those days such regular removals were scarcely possible, because of the difficulty of travelling. Only those who possessed some estate near Paris could indulge themselves in this way. Madame de Sévigné had this somewhat rare good fortune. Thanks to her uncle, "the dear, good man" who was priest at Livry, she had at her disposal a place for rest and retirement that she could reach in a few hours.

She was pleased with everything at Livry,—the clearness of the days, the coolness of the nights, the pure and wholesome air “that did her as much good as milk,” the noise of birds, so refreshing to her after the dismal Parisian street-cries, the pleasant garden with the balmy fragrance of honeysuckles, and the sight of the “sweet little landscape” encircling all. Everywhere else the rain annoyed her. “This ceaseless rain!” she wrote from Burgundy; “I am in a rage about it.” At Livry, where nothing disagreeable could exist, even the rains were charming. So she was happy every time she could go thither. She takes her daughter with her, and the dearest friends she has, to enjoy them all to herself; nor does she object to being there alone. She goes thither at all seasons: during Holy Week, to collect her thoughts and prepare to receive the sacrament; in spring and summer, to enjoy the fine weather. This is the cure for all her weary cares, for all her sorrows. “When I am out of temper I must be off to Livry.” Nothing was easier than to get there. Livry is only about three leagues from Paris, and she could stay there for a few days at any time; but when she thought of going to her estates in Burgundy or Brittany she must expect a long, costly, toilsome journey, not to be un-

dergone for a stay of a few weeks, nor undertaken every year. To induce her to take it required other motives than a desire for a change of scene; and as she was loath to set forth on her journey back, when once she had gone she remained long away.

Madame de Sévigné did not, then, travel the hundred leagues between Paris and the Rochers estate entirely for pleasure. She would probably have thought such pleasure somewhat dearly bought. She went thither out of duty,—for a closer inspection of her property, to settle some business, and, above all, to repair the breaches that Parisian life had made in her fortune. “I do not know in what condition you find your estates,” she wrote one day to Bussy. “As for me, Cousin, my estate at Bourbilly has brought me scarcely anything, on account of the low prices and poor market for wheat and other grains. Residing there is the only thing that can save us from poverty.” And Bussy replied: “Get yourself exiled, Madame,—the thing is less difficult than people imagine,—and you will find a use for the produce of Bourbilly.” She went into exile when there was need of it; without waiting for an order from the king, she set out bravely for some distant estate and stayed there sometimes a whole year, consuming her

income on the spot, and getting in the money due her. Her hopes in this regard proved often delusive, as we see from the following story she tells her daughter: "This morning a peasant came in with wallets everywhere about him; he had them under his arms, in his pockets, in his breeches. The good Abbé, who goes straight to the point, thought we were set up for life. 'Ah, my friend, you are well loaded down! How much have you brought?' 'Sir,' said he, gasping for breath, 'I believe there is a good thirty francs.' He had, my dear, all the coppers in France, which have taken refuge, with their peaked hats, in this province to try our patience." Yet with her usual skill she finally arranged everything, increased the rent of her farms, adjusted accounts with her debtors, and returned to Paris richer than when she left it. Everybody admired her prudent management; for, according to her friend Lenet's witty couplet,—

"What motive is there of more pertinence
For rural life, than doubling of one's rents?"

Nowadays we go from Paris to Vitré in seven hours; this journey took Madame de Sévigné eight or nine days, and sometimes more, in case she stopped on the way in some friendly abode. At best, they made no more than ten

leagues a day. The turnout was worthy of My Lady the Marchioness. "I travel with two coaches," she said to her daughter. "I have seven coach-horses, a pack-horse to carry my bed, and three or four mounted men. I shall be in my coach, drawn by my two fine horses; the Abbé will sometimes be with me. In the other coach, which will have four horses and a postilion, will be my son, La Mousse, and Helen." Her retinue is, as we see, a respectable one; but others were often more extensive. Madame de Montespan, when she went to take the waters at Vichy, travelled as follows: "She goes with her coach and six, accompanied by Thianges's little daughter; behind her she has a coach with the same number of horses, and containing six maids. She has two baggage-wagons, six sumpter-mules, and ten or twelve horse-guards without officers: her retinue consists of forty-five persons." As the road was long, they planned how to while away the time. Madame de Sévigné took care to select agreeable companions; she carried along in her coach books that she liked; they chatted, they re-read Corneille or Nicole, and from time to time they viewed the landscape. Madame de Sévigné had often passed along these beautiful banks of the Loire, and with very various feelings: once with her husband,

when he brought her to Brittany for the first time, in the joy and beauty of her youth; later on, with the son and daughter of whom she was so proud. Long after, when she revisited these scenes alone, she discovered in them new beauties, and she seemed never really to have seen them before. "There are periods in life," she said, "when self is the only thing we see." On the whole, these trips were not tiresome; and Madame de Sévigné gives us such pleasing descriptions of them that we who are unfamiliar with these interminable journeys are sometimes tempted to regret them.

At last comes the arrival at Vitré, and then at the Castle of Les Rochers, only about four miles from town. Imagine how Madame de Sévigné's heart must have throbbed when her coach entered the great square before the castle. Here she found the servants and vassals assembled to welcome her. Once, she tells us, her steward, Vaillant, had prepared a sort of triumphal entry for her son; he had got together more than fifteen hundred men-at-arms, all in holiday attire, with neckties of fresh ribbon. This old nobility, so degraded and humiliated at Versailles, sacrificed in favor of lawyers or financiers, cringing before department clerks, raised its head on approaching

its home, and recovered a sense of its former greatness.

The Castle of Les Rochers still stands, and there has not been very much change in its appearance since Madame de Sévigné dwelt there. It is a building composed of two rectangular wings attached to a central tower dating from the fifteenth century. Its appearance is simple and noble; there is no useless ornamentation; the single tower, with its elegant roof, its belfries, and its turrets, is very commanding. Toward the left stands out an isolated rotunda, connected with the castle only by the garden wall and gate. This is the chapel, and was built by the Abbé de Coulanges. Poor Abbé! notwithstanding his thrifty turn, he was possessed by one innocent passion,—the passion for building. “His hands itch to be at it,” said his niece; and from time to time, when there was no help for it, she allowed him to erect a wall. It must be confessed that in this instance he did not much abuse his privilege. His circular edifice is very modest, and from a distance might easily be taken for a mere dove-cot.

Between the chapel and the castle a gate opens into the flower-garden. We may imagine Madame de Sévigné eagerly hastening thither when scarcely rested after the journey.

What she liked best at Les Rochers was not the castle itself,—she was used to more elegant abodes,—but the garden and the park. She enjoys nothing more heartily than taking care of them; she makes endless changes, adorns them, brings them into conformity to the taste of the day. She began by pulling up those edgings of dwarf box that were so delectable in the eyes of the courtiers of Louis XIII.; she increased the number of grass-plots; and she filled the whole so full of jasmine-vines and orange-trees that in the evening, when the air was fragrant with their blossoms, she imagined herself in Provence. As soon as Le Nôtre had gained a reputation in the art of landscape-gardening, she engaged designs and plans of him. When they were carried out, and Les Rochers had begun to look like a little Versailles, she beheld her work with satisfaction. "This," she wrote to her daughter, "is something that our garden of holly would never have dreamed of becoming." From the garden we pass to the park, which is extensive and well laid out. It is here more than anywhere else that Madame de Sévigné's memory is preserved. The avenues of trees she planted still exist, and the guide repeats to you the names she gave these shady walks. Here is the Solitary Walk, the Endless Walk, winding about to an invisible

termination; on the other hand, the Mall, straight and broad, ending in a kind of square from which the eye can take in the whole landscape. The Rochers estate is in the midst of a basin of considerable extent, rising gradually toward its outer edges. There is neither that varied surface nor those grand or sudden changes of prospect that we now delight in,—no river crossing the plain, no steep mountain hemming it in. It is a peaceful landscape, which the spectator enjoys calmly, gaining from it a tranquil mind. Trees, close together, and crowded with leaves, furnish its main characteristic. Even to the verge of the horizon nothing else is to be seen, and we could imagine ourselves in the midst of a forest. Madame de Sévigné, having the sure eye of a careful observer, was impressed not only by the abundance of the trees, but also by the dark intensity of their verdure. “The green of the woods is even more beautiful than at Livry.” The correctness of this remark may be verified by visiting the pretty park at Vitré, or by viewing the plains about Rennes, from the heights of Thabor.

Life at Les Rochers was austere simple and regular. Upon one of the last visits Madame de Sévigné made to her old castle after her son’s marriage, she described to Madame

de Grignan the way they spent their days. It was, to be sure, a day when she was left alone with her daughter-in-law, the "dear little friend" being absent. "We rise at eight o'clock: very often I go to breathe the cool air of the woods until the bell rings for mass at nine; after mass we dress, bid each other good-morning, gather orange-flowers, take dinner; until five, we work or read,—now my son is away I read to save his wife's weak chest. At five I leave her; I am off to these lovely avenues, with a lackey to follow me; I have books; I go from place to place and vary the turns of my walks; I take now a devotional book, now an historical,—turn about, to give variety,—musing a little on God and his providence, possessing my soul, thinking of the future; at last, toward eight o'clock, I hear a bell,—it rings for supper. . . . My dear child, you are the only thing I prefer to the melancholy and calm repose that I here enjoy." This is a very monotonous life; it is, however, sometimes brightened up by some unforeseen incident. In the first place, visitors frequently came,—doubtless not always agreeable ones. "You who have never stirred out of Paris," said Bussy, "don't know what provincial rusticity is." Yet there were some among the number whom it was a delight to welcome.

Intelligent people can be found everywhere, with whom a few moments can be spent agreeably. Sometimes very great personages honor the Marchioness with their company,—for example, the Princess of Taranto, the Duke de Chaulnes, the Marquis de Lavardin, Lieutenant-Governor of Brittany. The latter, in the absence of the Governor, takes delight in displaying all the pomp of power; he comes accompanied by his officers, by his guards, preceded by trumpeters, followed by twenty gentlemen as an escort; and all this puts the peaceful castle in an uproar. In her turn, the Marchioness was of course obliged to acknowledge the civilities that were shown her, and to visit all the neighbors. Sometimes she even allowed herself to be enticed away, by the entreaties of friends, to appear at the Parliament of Brittany. This was a great undertaking, requiring her to leave Les Rochers and set up her establishment at Vitré, at Vannes, or at Rennes. She was received in these capitals with an enthusiasm of which she finally became somewhat tired; she thought there was too much noise, too much of a crush, too many festivities, above all too many dinners,—“dinners grand enough to breed a famine,” the details of which she dared not relate to her daughter for fear of afflicting her with dys-

pepsia. After a few days, as soon as she could do so with decency, she fled from this social whirl and returned to Les Rochers, "hungry for fasting and silence."

How could a fashionable woman, accustomed to live in the midst of the pleasantest society of Paris, be so much delighted with her Breton castle, and remain there without tedium for entire years? It is natural that this should surprise us, for it surprised herself. "It is strange," said she, "how in this wholly dull and almost melancholy life the days slip by without our notice." The reason for this was that she possessed a wonderfully versatile character, and just as she adapted herself naturally to all persons, so she could adjust herself to all circumstances. She said of her son, "He catches the spirit of the place where he is." It is plain that the son inherited this quality from his mother. The gayest of women of the world became, when in the country, a country woman. Solitude did not affright her; on the contrary, she often sought it. One day she wrote to her daughter from her retreat at Livry: "Here I am, my dear daughter, all alone. I did not wish to freight myself with any one else's troubles. There is no company to tempt me; I mean to boast of spending all the afternoon in this meadow, conversing with

our cows and sheep." And when to the pleasure of being alone, reading, meditating, conversing with the cows and sheep, she could add the delights of walking in a flowery garden or under great trees, and of beholding a fine landscape, her contentment was such that it was not easy to bring her back to society.

It has been said that Madame de Sévigné was one of those seventeenth-century writers who best understood and most loved Nature. This is a just observation, if it be not made to imply too much. We must first remark that she never makes those long descriptions of scenery to which we are habituated. She portrays it with one stroke, and even this stroke is usually not peculiar to her, and discloses nothing very novel. Let us recall that she said, "I invent nothing." This is the truth; and whatever she does, the stimulus must come to her from without. She began by seeing Nature through the medium of her favorite poets; it was the "Jerusalem Delivered," the "Aminta," the "Pastor Fido," that first quickened her admiration of Nature. Here also she caught the trick of frequent mythological allusions. She will say in the most natural tone in the world that she "has passed a couple of hours with the Hamadryads," or that she has taken an evening

walk “under the beaming glances of Endymion’s fair mistress.” That is the way the people about her talked; by her contemporaries, however, these images were taken as conventional; when they depicted a sunrise or a sunset, when they spoke of spring or winter, one would think they had never seen them except in the poets’ verses. Madame de Sévigné looked at Nature,—then almost a novel thing to do,—and received from it the same impression, only more complete and life-like, than the pictures of Tasso, Guarini, and others had conveyed to her. She repeats the terms they used, she employs their images, their metaphors; but with her everything is quickened by her own emotions. We feel that what she says in the words of others she has seen with her own eyes; the phrase may now and then be trite, but the feeling is always sincere. Herein, I repeat, consists her true originality. It is amusing to note how she corrects her daughter, who has never looked at the country except from the windows of Grignan, and who knows of nightingales only by having found them in poetical descriptions: “Where do you find that nightingales are heard on the 13th of June? Ah! they are too busy then, caring for their little households. They no longer think of singing or

of making love ; they have more serious business." Madame de Sévigné herself would not have made such a mistake. She took a certain pride in having a good knowledge of country matters. When spring begins, she goes the rounds every day ; she wishes to see the almost imperceptible transitions, the delicate shades through which leaves pass from red to green ; she goes from tree to tree ; when done with the hornbeams, she turns to the beech-trees, and then to the oaks ; the inspection over, having observed and noted all, she says with amusing confidence : " At a pinch, I don't know but I could make a spring myself."

Thus it is that the time slips softly by at Les Rochers. Each season has its pleasures for her. There is no doubt of her delight in hearing the nightingale, the cuckoo, and the warbler heralding the spring-time in the woods ; but she finds pleasure too in " those beautiful crystalline days of autumn, no longer hot and yet not cold." And winter itself is not without its charms, when the sun shines, in sharp, frosty weather, " and the trees are adorned with pearls and crystals." At last the time comes to leave her solitude ; she returns to Paris without eagerness, bringing to her daughter the savings she has made,—considerable

savings, amounting on one occasion to more than sixteen thousand livres,—and I fancy that while others were congratulating her on her courage, she said to herself, deep down in her heart, that it was money pleasantly earned.

V.

THE charming chats filling the letters of Madame de Sévigné are not confined, as is often thought, to family matters. There is talk of many other things. For twenty-five years she kept her daughter informed touching everything said and done at Paris and Versailles. Madame de Grignan, away in Provence, was very eager for such news. "The Mercury" and "The French Gazette," the semi-official newspapers controlled by the authorities, took good care not to tell what people most desired to know. The papers under the control of the Abbé Bigorre and others lifted only one corner of the veil. Madame de Sévigné, writing solely for her daughter, did not feel bound to suppress anything. She told all she knew; and as she had great acquaintances and frequented the best houses, she knew almost all that was doing or about to be done. There was no domestic intrigue,

no political or military event, that she did not mention in passing. Therefore, if we intended to follow her through all she relates, we should be obliged to recount the whole history of this epoch. This task has been several times performed, and it appears useless for me to take it up. I only desire, in conclusion, to present a few summary observations.

Studying the seventeenth century in the histories is one thing, and seeking to become acquainted with it by reading contemporary letters is another and a far different thing. The two procedures give rise to conflicting impressions. Historians, taking a bird's-eye view of their subject, portray its most general characteristics; they bring out only the prominent features, and, sacrificing all the rest, draw pictures whose precision and simplicity captivate our minds. We finally get into the habit of seeing an epoch as they have painted it, and cannot imagine there was anything in it besides the qualities they specify. But when we read letters relating without alteration or selection events as they took place, the opinions of men and things we have drawn from the historians are greatly modified. We then perceive that good and evil are at all times mingled, and even that the proportions of the mixture vary less than one would think. Cousin says some-

where: "In a great age, all is great." It is just the contrary that is true: there is no age so great that there is not much littleness about it; and if we undertake to study history we should expect this, so as not to reckon without our host. No epoch has been more celebrated, more admired, than the reign of Louis XIV.; there is danger lest the correspondence of Madame de Sévigné may much abate the warmth of our admiration. She is constantly telling strange stories that compel us to pause and reflect. When, in a society represented as so noble, so delicate, so regular, we meet with so many shameful disorders, so many ill-assorted households, so many persons whose fortunes are sustained only by dishonest expedients,—with great lords buying and not paying, promising and not keeping their word, borrowing and never returning, kneeling before ministers and ministers' mistresses, cheating at play like M. de Cessac, living, like Caderousse, at the expense of a great lady, surrendering, like Soubise, a wife to the king, or, like Villarceaux, a niece, or insisting, with Bussy, "that the charest of their honor should be delighted when such a good fortune befalls their family,"—it seems to me we have a right to conclude that people then were hardly our superiors, that perhaps in some points we are better than

they were, and that in any case it is not worth while to set them up as models, to the disparagement of our own times.

In one respect, however, they were unlike us. In those days there were certain subjects on which people were generally agreed, and these were precisely the subjects that now give rise to the greatest divisions,—religion and politics. Not that all were pious then,—far from it,—but almost all were believers, and almost none contested the principle of royal authority. To-day, religious belief and belief in monarchy are well-nigh extinct; and there are hardly any left of those commonly-received opinions, escaped by none, impregnating all, breathed in like the air, and always found at the bottom of the heart on occasions of grave need, despite all the inward changes that experience has wrought. Is this a good or an evil? Should we rejoice at it or regret it? Each one will answer according to his character and inclinations. Daring minds that feel strong enough to form their own convictions are glad to be delivered from prejudices interfering with independence of opinion, glad to have free scope. But the rest, who form the vast majority, who are without such high aims, and whose life is, moreover, taken up with other cares, are troubled, uncertain, ill at ease

when they have to settle these great problems independently ; they regret that they can no longer find the solutions all worked out, and sadly repeat with Jocelyn : —

“ Ah, why was I born in days stormy and dread,
When the pilgrim of life hath no rest for his head ;
When the way disappears ; when the spent human mind,
Groping, doubting, still strives some new pathway to find,
Unable to trust in the hopes of the Old
Or to strike out a New from its perishing mould ! ”¹

This sort of anguish of spirit was little known in the seventeenth century, as Madame de Sévigné’s letters clearly show.

Though she was much excited and highly gratified when the king spoke to her, and though one day in her youth she was tempted to think him a very great prince because he had just danced with her, she was not one of those who had a superstitious reverence for him, and who awarded him honors almost divine. She saw the folly of this excessive flattery, and occasionally made sport of it. “ I am told,” she wrote to her daughter, “ that the Minim monks of your own Provence, in dedicating a thesis to the king, have compared him to God, but in such a way as to make it plain

¹ From the poem by Lamartine, entitled “ Jocelyn.” Lamartine lived through all the revolutions and usurpations of power from 1790 to 1869, — a time of conflict, doubt, and unsettlement in matters spiritual as well as temporal. — TR.

that God is only a copy. . . . Too much is too much; I should never have dreamed that the Minims would go to such a length." A former partisan of the Rebellion of the Fronde, Madame de Sévigné always had a degree of independence and a secret spirit of opposition. This enhances the value of her testimony when she shows how greatly France was then enamoured of her king. "What will courtiers not do to please their master? With what joyful devotion they rush toward ruin in his service! Do they reckon health, pleasure, property, life itself, of any moment compared with obeying and pleasing him?" And elsewhere: "If such were our feelings toward God, what saints we should be." The king inspired so much respect that even the people he had most cruelly treated did not ascribe to him any responsibility for his harsh conduct. Bussy, in the course of his exile of seventeen years, could not help having occasional fits of impatience; he vents his spleen on the friends who seem to have forgotten him, and inveighs against those he thinks have taken his place; but his wrath never attacks the chief and only author of his woes. For the king he never has anything but respect, submission, affection, passionate devotion. The king, even when he chastises, is the good master, whose

name Bussy cannot pronounce without tears. "It is quite natural," said he to his cousin, "to hate those who injure us; and yet I love the king, desire his welfare, and pray to God for him with all my heart." Really this was very magnanimous. Thus it was that even the people who felt most injured by this form of government did not dream of changing it. It occurred to them to desire the disgrace of a favorite, or the fall of a minister who as they supposed had injured them; but their desires went no further, and we cannot perceive that they ever imagined any other government for France than that under which they lived.

As to religion the minds of men were a little more at variance. Of course unbelievers then existed, and even in considerable numbers. "You should know," said Nicole, "that the great heresy of the world is neither Calvinism nor Lutheranism; it is Atheism." Madame de Sévigné speaks of some of these atheists, Saint-Germain, Ninon de Lenclos, and of their endeavors to pervert young people. "How dangerous this Ninon is! If you knew how she dogmatizes about religion it would make you shudder." But let us not forget that many of these unbelievers were really little more than backsliding believers. With reference to that strange anecdote which shows

us Condé and the Princess Palatine, with Dr. Bourdelot, trying to burn a piece of the true cross, Sainte-Beuve remarks that this youthful incredulity, distrusting itself and yet attempting sacrilege, is something very far removed from the calm indifference that requires no proof to make it disbelieve. "After all," he adds, "these free-thinkers who prided themselves so much on burning the true cross were little in advance of their age,—an age in which other great minds could believe in cures made by the holy thorn." Many of these "libertines," as they were then called, were so only out of bravado, to astonish simple people and make themselves notorious. At the siege of Lérida, Bussy, while dining with some madcaps in a church, had the fiddlers summoned and a corpse disinterred, to make it dance a round; yet in reality this same Bussy was afraid of ghosts, and confesses that as soon as he lay down he tucked his head under the coverlet "so as to prevent his hearing anything that could arouse his fears." When a fire threatened to burn down his castle, he made haste to throw a scapulary into the flames; and the fire being at once extinguished, he could never tell whether his good fortune was due to the scapulary or to the wind which had changed just in time. It is not a matter for surprise

that the unbelief of these professed free-thinkers had not much stability. Most of them, when their sceptical period had passed, became pious. The rest were unwilling to scandalize people, and when their last moments came, to do as others did, they called a priest. This is what one of their number, Guy-Patin, calls dying *more majorum*.¹ On the whole, this rare and timid opposition was reduced to insignificance amid the great uniformity of belief, and ought not to prevent our saying that, taken all in all, this was a Christian age.

But all were not Christians of the same sort. Some people were Christians only from habit, tradition, and breeding, without belief enough to influence their conduct very much. Let us call to mind the amusing story Madame de Sévigné tells of the “dear little man” (the Count de Fiesque) and the “Mouse-trap” (Madame de Lyonne), who were on the most intimate terms. At a rendezvous she had assigned him, after two long hours’ converse on topics anything but religious, she abruptly said to him: “Dear little man, I have something laid up against you.”—“Pray, what is it, Madame?” “You do not worship the Virgin; alas! you do not worship the Virgin; that

¹ “In ancestral fashion,” or, “after the manner of our fathers.”—TR.

gives me a strange pang." Madame de Sévigné's piety was not so accommodating. She doubtless brought to religious matters, as to all other things, great freedom of thought. The spectacular piety of the people of Provence, and their processions of pilgrims and penitents, made her impatient. She speaks with little respect of the shrines of the good Saint Marceau and Saint Geneviève, paraded through the streets of Paris in the hope of obtaining fair weather or rain, and bowing civilly when they met. When she discussed with Protestants, she was tempted to make some very compromising concessions. Her friend La Mousse, the Cartesian, having explained to her certain of Origen's opinions condemned by the Church, she did not hesitate to pronounce them very reasonable. "You will have great trouble in fixing the notion of eternal punishment in my head, unless the king and Holy Scripture command it." At risk of falling out with all the saints, she had written above the main altar of her chapel these words: "Soli Deo honor et gloria."¹ That is the way, she said, to make no one jealous. Do not conclude from this that she was a "libertine," for we have already seen that, on the contrary, free-thinkers made her shudder.

¹ "To God alone be honor and glory." — TR.

From her youth up, Port-Royal had attracted her by its austere morals and the purity of its teachings. When she has just been talking with one of the Port-Royal doctors, or reading their works, she is seized with such fits of piety that her cousin Bussy, to whom, as to others, she keeps preaching, takes alarm, and feels the need of cooling her zeal. "We must not take things too much to heart," he told her; "that is very unfavorable to long life. In my opinion it is almost equivalent to being damned, to think too much upon the subject. There is reason in all things ; let us live well and enjoy ourselves. Too great sensitiveness in matters of conscience makes heretics. I only ask to get up to Paradise, and no higher." But Bussy had no reason for alarm ; Madame de Sévigné's piety was not so formidable as he supposed ; it had many intermissions, and we behold it in her letters successively ceasing and reviving. It is most often when she is alone at Livry or Les Rochers, during the winter days, that she has, so to say, regular conversions to piety. She re-reads Nicole and Pascal, recalls the many friends she has lost. "Alas!" she says, "how death goes up and down, seizing his prey on every hand!" and naturally the death of others makes her think of her own. On the sun-dial in her garden

she had the following device engraved: "Unam time."¹ This awful and uncertain hour she often thought of, and the dread she had of it sometimes inspired eloquent lamentings: "I find myself bound by an awkward engagement. Launched into life without my consent, I must leave it; this overwhelms me. And how shall I leave it? Whither? By what door? When will it be? With what preparation? How shall I stand with God? What shall I have to offer Him? What can I hope for? Am I worthy of Paradise? Do I deserve hell? What alternatives! What perplexity! . . . I had better have died in the arms of my nurse!" And then she promised herself to live more seriously, and to be better prepared for that dread hour; she formed good resolutions for the future; but very soon "a breath of air, a ray of sunlight dispelled all these nightly thoughts." She saw her friends again; she took part in their lively and scandalous conversation; she laughed like the rest, and more than the rest, at the malicious anecdotes she heard related, and could not resist the pleasure of repeating them with admirable humor. She was vexed with herself, scolded herself, and did not correct herself. "I am neither on God's side nor the Devil's," she said;

¹ "Fear one hour." — TR.

"such a condition troubles me, and yet, between you and me, I think it the most natural condition in the world." It was so natural to her that, sooth to say, she never got out of it. Despite all her good resolutions, she spent her life in such alternations of piety and back-sliding up to the time of the illness that carried her off. Then, however, she was firm and resolute; her son-in-law, who witnessed her last moments, tell us that "she reaped the fruits of the good reading for which her taste had been so eager, and looked death in the face with wondrous firmness and submission." This was, indeed, the usual way of dying at that period. Many intelligent people thought, with Madame de Rambures, that "it is tiresome to live in God's grace," but they all desired to have that grace at death.

Dying at the age of seventy, to the last Madame de Sévigné bore the burden of her years lightly. Madame de Scudéry, Bussy's friend, who had seen her several years before, was surprised to find her still beautiful. She always seemed young to her friends. We have her last letters, and there is nothing in them to suggest her age; they are as graceful, as witty, as piquant and full of life, as the rest. In the one she wrote a fortnight before her death, she deplores the loss of the young Mar-

quis de Blanchefort, son of the Marshal de Créquy, with a touching affection which proves that, despite her years, her heart had remained without a wrinkle. This was a rare good fortune, and she must have known better than any one else how to value it. Never, surely, was her stubborn optimism better vindicated; and then, most of all, she had reason to say that she was contented with her lot. To live on without growing old, to feel alive and whole to the last, to preserve in maturity what is best in youth, vigor of mind and freshness of feeling, then, when the end has come, to find in the depths of the soul the beliefs of early years, and to fall softly asleep with a sure hope,—is not this, for beings who live like us amid darkness and uncertainty, an enviable lot?

THE END.

